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THE WORKS OF

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME XII.

ROY'S WIFE

Frontispiece.

ROY'S WIFE

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY CECIL ALDEN

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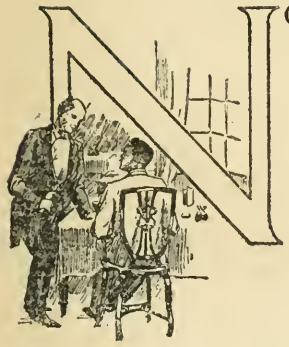
ROY'S WIFE

ROY'S WIFE

CHAPTER I

A PINT OF PORT



NONE of your Scotch pints, dear to hard-headed North Britons of the last century, not even an imperial pint, containing only one-fourth of the former measure, but an hotel pint, in hotel limits, of hotel vintage, at hotel price. Sound, no doubt, though rough and fruity; strong, full-flavoured, and exceedingly restorative to body and mind.

An open wine-book propped against an uncorked bottle offers the produce of many European vineyards at the highest possible tariff. In its first page alone the varieties of champagne and claret might stock the cellar of a duke. But he is a man of unusually trustful nature who drinks wine in a coffee-room at the rate of one hundred and twenty shillings per dozen, and experienced travellers wisely content themselves with pale ale, brandy-and-water, a glass of brown sherry, or a pint of port.

Neither wine nor wine-card has yet attracted attention from the visitor who ordered both. A waiter, banging hot plates down under his nose, to serve "a bit of fish," notices nothing remarkable in this unit among many guests. His manners are quiet, he wears a good coat, and drinks wine with his dinner; the waiter, therefore, considers him a gentleman. That his face should be weary, his air abstracted, seems but the natural result of a journey by rail from London to the seaside; and if he thinks of him at all, it is as "a gent from town," good for a shilling or two when he takes his departure, notwithstanding that "attendance" is charged in the bill.

The fish has been to London and back since leaving its native shore, and is sent away uneaten; but the port is sipped, tasted, and approved. The first glass permeates through his tired frame till it tingles at his finger-ends; with the second, there rises a sensation of renewed vigour and vitality in the whole man; ere he is half-way to the bottom of the third, a change has come over himself, his surroundings, his past, his present—above all, his future—that future which looked so blank and uninteresting ten minutes ago. The carpet seems no longer faded, the coffee-room dingy and ill-ventilated. A stout lady at the corner table, dining in solemn silence with two shy daughters and an ungainly son, ceases to be an object of aversion and disgust. Even the old gentleman by the window, who gasps and snorts during the process of deglutition, now excites no stronger feeling than a mild hope that he will presently be seized with some kind of fit, such as shall necessitate his removal upstairs. The drinker is surprised at his own benevolence, and wonders, not without contempt, how such an

alteration should have been wrought in his nature by warmth, food, and a pint of port!

Reflection has been forced on him in the contrast between present inactivity and the stir of his former life. With nothing to do, plenty of time to do it, and nobody to help him, he has become a philosopher in spite of himself. He has acquired the habit of analysing his own character and motives, examining them, as it were, from an outside point of view, in a spirit of cynicism, half scornful, half indulgent, but wholly without result, his speculations only leading him farther and farther into that labyrinth of which *cui bono* is the centre and the goal. He is easily depressed: no wonder. But his hopes rise quickly as they fall. When he sat down to dinner he felt a hundred years old, yet ere the most odorous of Cheddar cheeses can be thrust in his face, the world we live in has acquired a new lustre, a fresh interest; society seems no longer an infliction nor life a mistake. It is his nature to accept the metamorphosis with amusement, curiosity, and mistrust. "What an absurdity," he reflects, "is this action and reaction of body and mind, this irregular and spontaneous oscillation that governs the machine called man — a machine in some respects constructed with such elaborate care and precision, in others lamentably ill-suited to the purposes of life! A steam-engine is not thrown out of gear because we feed its fires with inferior coal, or lubricate its hinges with a cheaper oil than the best by sixpence a gallon; but the man who invented the steam-engine can be driven into madness in three minutes with as many glasses of brandy, and only half a pound of such cheese as that, for instance, would weigh him down with a depression wanting but a

few grains of actual despair. If the masterpiece of nature, the lord of creation, had been made with a gizzard rather than a liver, would he not oftener be lord of himself? which is more to the purpose; and would not that self more seldom prove a 'heritage of woe'? I have sat here but five-and-twenty minutes by the coffee-room clock. The waiter thinks I am the same person whose orders he took for dinner, and who told him to remove the fish *at once.* How little he knows! That man and I are as different as chalk itself from the very cheese that still pervades the room. He was a pessimist—almost a devil-worshipper; I am an optimist, and in so far a good Christian that I am at peace with all mankind! When I drew my chair to this table I felt, to use the expression of an Irish friend, as if 'the backbone was out of me.' No interest, no energy, no concern for my luggage, no British susceptibility to imposition, scarcely enough spirit available to have resented an insult or returned a blow. Now I have become curious about the locality, the neighbourhood, the shops, the church, the circulating library, the new pier, and the state of the tide. I ascertain by personal inquiry that my portmanteau is safe in No. 5. I cannot be overcharged at present, inasmuch as I have scarcely yet laid the foundation of a bill, but I am prepared to expend guineas rather than be cheated out of shillings; while as for blows and insults, my arm has kept my head ere now. Let the aggressor look out; I am well able to take care of myself. And all this has been brought about by the consumption of a pint of port! Great Heavens! can it be possible that my intellect, my sagacity, my nobler qualities, even my courage, are thus

dependent on drink! Life was a very dull business half an hour ago. The journey, though smooth and easy, had become so slow and tiresome; the road was exceedingly uninteresting, leading nowhere in particular after all. For me and for my neighbours the way made, like that of an unskilful swimmer, was so out of proportion to the energy expended, the puffing and blowing, the hurry, the effort, and the splash! We were all, like flies on the window-pane, buzzing to and fro, backwards and forwards, round and round, never relaxing our efforts, yet never penetrating an impassable transparency that kept us from the reality outside. I have envied a man breaking stones on the road, because with a daily duty and a definite purpose he seemed in some measure to fulfil the object of existence, and to be less of a sham and mountebank than myself. I am satisfied now that such reflections were but results of a languid circulation. My pulse—for I felt it when the waiter wasn't looking—beats full and regular, seventy to the minute; I seem still to have duties, pleasures, perhaps even happiness, in store for one whose scalp is not yet bare, and who can count the grey hairs in his whiskers. Waiter, a toothpick!"

"Beg your pardon, sir; we don't keep them in the coffee-room now, sir."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"We found it didn't answer, sir. The gentlemen took them away."

Lost in the field of reflection opened up by such an admission, our visitor might have relapsed into something of his previous despondency, but that his attention was diverted to the laying of a table at the other end of the room with rather more preparation and nicety of arrangement than had

been accorded in his own case, though his sense of smell caused him to suspect that the fish he had discarded was brought to the front once more. Spoons and forks, however, had been polished to a dazzling lustre, the tablecloth was very white, and in its centre stood a handful of flowers in a dull glass vase. Surveying this effort, the waiter smiled satisfaction, while our philosopher threw himself back in his chair to see what would come of it with the good-humoured indifference of a man who has dined.

What came of it was nothing unusual to the waiter, to the old gentleman, to the mother and daughters, even to the ungainly son—simply a single lady dining later than other inmates of the hotel; but to the port-drinker, in regular gradations, at a startling rate of progression, a distraction, an amusement, a mystery, an engrossing interest, and an irresistible attraction.

The very rustle of her dress, as it swept the dingy coffee-room carpet, was suggestive of grace and dignity, of a smooth, easy gait, springing from symmetry of form and vigorous elasticity of limb. That horses can go in all shapes is an established maxim of the stable, but when women are good movers it needs no anatomist to assure us that in external structure at least they have been "nobly planned." Even the waiter seemed impressed, smirking and flourishing his napkin with unusual emphasis while interposing his person between the object of his assiduities and the observer who wanted to see her face. It vexed him that this should be completely averted. As the lady seated herself, he could only detect the turn of a full and shapely figure, a delicate little ear, and a white neck from which the hair was scrupulously lifted

and arranged, dark and lustrous, tight and trim, in a fashion exceedingly becoming to the beautiful, but trying to the more ordinary of womankind.

Many a romance has been built on slighter scaffolding; and no young man of half his age and a quarter his experience was more likely to make a fool of himself about a woman than the gentleman in question—John Roy, Esquire, of Royston, a deputy-lieutenant for his county, and a magistrate who had never qualified in the Commission of the Peace. There was nothing uncommon in his history. Eton and the ten-oar—Oxford and the drag—upper division, fifth form, at school, and a degree at college—woodcocks in Albania, lansquenet at St. Petersburg, Hanover for German, Paris for fencing, and home again for real enjoyment of life—then a little Melton, a little Newmarket, a little London, with the prospect of completing this conventional course in a prudent marriage, and such rural vegetation as would tend to the increase of personal weight and prolongation of the family tree.

Not the best training, perhaps, even for the level path he seemed likely to tread in the journey of life. Not the wisest preparation, certainly, for a time when there must be an end of business and pleasure; when tobacco shall cease to soothe, and wine to exhilarate; when dancing waters and June sunshine are to be exchanged for drawn curtains and beef-tea; when it will need neither the doctor's grave face nor the nurse's vapid smile to tell us that we have done with our accustomed habits, pursuits, and interests; never to greet our guests, ride our horses, nor balance our accounts again; no more to cherish a grudge, nor indulge a prejudice, nor kindle in a glow of a kindly action on behalf of

our fellow-man! The journey is compulsory, the destination inevitable, yet how little thought we seem to take for here or hereafter!

In Eastern nations every male, whatever may be his rank, is brought up to some kind of handicraft, and so far is made independent of external fortune. In England we pride ourselves on teaching our sons a smattering of many things, and a thorough knowledge of none. This we call the education of a gentleman; but surely, in such loose, discursive culture of the mind, we fail to stimulate that power of concentration which can alone remove gigantic obstacles, to encourage that habit of persistency which forms the very backbone of success.

John Roy received "the education of a gentleman," and did credit to his nurture as well as another; but there came a time, before he was turned thirty, when he wished he had been bred a shoemaker or a stonemason, because of the dull dead pain for which there is no anodyne like the pressure of daily want and the fatigue of daily work.

The lives of most of us in so far resemble a skein of silk, that they unwind freely and readily enough until they arrive at a knot. Patient, even pleased, we sit in a ludicrous attitude, stiffened by the voluntary fetters that a pair of white hands have fitted deftly round our wrists, and while we smile and look foolish, lo! there is a jerk, a quiver, a stop; the pretty lips tighten, the pencilled eyebrows frown, and presently the merry-go-round that went so swimmingly comes to a deadlock. So she brings out her scissors to solve the whole difficulty with a vicious little snip, observing calmly, "I began at the wrong end."

Fell in love with him because he always stood in the same place

There was a Lady Jane in Roy's life who also began at the wrong end. She chose to fall in love with him because she was idle, because her younger sister was engaged, because he always stood at the same place in the Park when she rode there, perhaps because the London season is so insufferably tedious without some definite attraction. Having decided that she would "like him a little," she made up her mind that he should like her a great deal. There was no difficulty in the capture. Handsome and high-bred, asked everywhere, and sufficiently admired even in London, she had but to look her wishes; in three days the man was at her beck and call. Such stories have been told so often they are hardly worth repeating. He had never really cared for a woman before, he never cared quite in the same way for a woman again.

Men, like animals, take their punishment differently according to their dispositions. Some fret and chafe, and forget all about it; others turn cowardly and despondent, or sullen and savage; but all lose something of that fire and dash which prompts untried natures to achieve the marvellous in aiming at the impossible.

Lady Jane, with her new distraction, was very happy for a fortnight, a month, six weeks! It seemed so nice to be petted, to be worshipped, to have some twelve stone of manhood all to one's self. She felt quite sorry for the other girls, plodding along, dismounted as it were, while she rode her hobby in triumph with her delicate nose in the air. Mr. Roy—she wished he had a prettier name than John—was so devoted, so amiable, above all so true. He never gave her the slightest twinge of jealousy (she would have liked him all the better if he had), but told her every hour that

she was too good for him—a princess stooping to a squire, Beauty smiling on the Beast—and that he considered himself unworthy to wipe the very dust from her feet. After a while she believed him, as a woman will believe anything, if it is only repeated often enough; and when she overheard Aunt Julia whisper to mamma that "Jane might do so much better," began to think perhaps Aunt Julia was right.

"She stopped it before they were regularly engaged. Nobody could accuse Jane of behaving badly"—so said her family—"and if Mr. Roy had presumed on the high spirits and fascinating manners of a girl who was popular with everybody, he might thank his own folly for his disappointment."

They allowed, however, that he "behaved beautifully," as did Jane, who returned everything he had given her, except some music; and on one occasion when they met in society after their rupture, shook hands with him as kindly and calmly as if he had been her grandfather.

He saw a fresh admirer, with a large rent-roll, put his arm round her waist for a waltz, and stepped into the street with a strange numb feeling, like a patient whose leg has been cut off—the sensation was akin to relief, yet in some respects worse to bear than pain. It was characteristic of the man that he never blamed her. "I suppose they are all alike," he said to his cigar, and so, walking home in the rain, made up his mind that this also was vanity!

Lady Jane rode in the Park pretty regularly till the end of the season, sometimes with, sometimes without, the eligible admirer; but she looked in vain for Mr. Roy's figure at the accustomed spot; missing it none the less, perhaps, that she wondered

what had become of him, and whether he did not sometimes think of her still.

John Roy was the last man to howl. Nobody else should know how hard he was hit. His stronger nature told him that he was meant for something better than to be the puppet of a woman's smile, and, though they smarted intolerably, he had the grace to be ashamed of his wounds. By the time Lady Jane went to Cowes he was whirling a lasso at wild horses in South America, living on beef and water, burning quantities of tobacco, and spending sixteen hours out of the four-and-twenty on a Mexican saddle in the open air. Smoking and riding combined soon modified the symptoms of his malady; its cure, though slow, was progressive. In twelve months he felt resigned, and in eighteen comfortable. After two or three years he came back to Europe, having travelled over a great part of the world, with nothing left to remind him of his pangs but a cynical resolve never to be caught in such a trap again. "Not if I know it!" says he who has once burned his fingers; but the spark kindles when he does *not* know it, and the flame consumes him none the less greedily that he had been dried and seasoned in the heat of a former fire.

Royston was got ready for its owner; but he only lived there at intervals, trying to do his duty as a landlord for a time, then flying off at a tangent to seek some distraction, in however mild a change, from the weariness of his everyday life.

Thus it was that a September evening found him in a quiet watering-place on the southern coast, speculating, after a coffee-room dinner, on the beauty of features and sweetness of disposition suggested by the back of a lady's head. Watch as he would, she never turned it so much as an inch.

There was the beautiful ear, the white skin, the trim, dark hair, but nothing more. How if the rest of her person should in no way correspond with this exquisite sample? She might squint, she might have lost her teeth, she might wear a wooden leg! He had heard or read of such disillusions, such disappointments. The uncertainty began to get irksome, annoying, intolerable. Could he not make some excuse to walk across the room yonder, to the chimney-piece, where he would be full in front of her? To look at the clock, for instance; the dial of that timepiece being a foot in diameter, and calculated for short-sighted inquirers at ten paces off. He had already moved his chair, when she rose. "Forty-six, if you please," she said to the waiter in a low, sweet voice, as indicating the number of her apartment, for proper registry of her bill, and so walked smoothly and gracefully to the door.

Disappointment! disillusion! Not a bit of it! As lovely a face as a man could wish to look at, set on as shapely a form! Features not quite classical, only because so soft and womanly; deep grey eyes, fringed with long black lashes; a mouth too large, a chin too prominent, but for the white teeth and perfect curves of the one, the firm and well-cut outline of the other. A complexion delicate rather than pale, a figure somewhat full and tall, a graceful head carried nobly on neck and shoulders; last, not least, an abundance of dark and silky hair, growing low on the brow, square at the temples, and drawn tight off the forehead to wind in thick shining coils round the skull.

Mr. Roy had a habit of talking to himself, "You darling!" he whispered, as the door closed. "That is the nicest woman I ever saw in my life!"

CHAPTER II

A PAIR OF BOOTS

THE smoke-room, as the waiter called it, was empty. Our friend felt pleased to find that uncomfortable apartment at his sole disposal. Devoid of drapery, floored with oil-cloth, bare of all furniture but wooden chairs, horsehair sofas, and spittoons, this retreat offered few temptations to a smoker, and such guests as were devoted to the practice usually chose to consume their tobacco out of doors. It was a bright night, with a clear sky and a rising tide, yet Roy seemed to prefer the flicker of gas in this dim, desolate apartment to the fresh briny air and a moonlit sea. To be under the same roof with her was a strong point; it would be his own fault if he could not, in some way, make the acquaintance of this fascinating stranger before she left the hotel. He was a man of the world, but he had seen a great deal of that world with his own eyes, and travel, no doubt, tends to simplify the character while it enlarges the mind. He did not at once suspect evil of her because journeying unprotected and alone; nor did he feel that so attractive a woman must be in a false position without a companion of her own sex. Again and again he rehearsed the little scene that he hoped to bring about next day. The meeting on the stairs,

the profound and deferential bow, repeated on the pier, so unobtrusively, that to offer a newspaper, a novel, a handful of fresh flowers, would seem a tribute of homage rather than an unauthorised impertinence; then, by slow degrees, morning greetings, afternoon conversations, perhaps at last a walk by the sea, an explanation of motives, a hint at covert admiration from the first, and so on—and so on—to the end—

Here a memory of Lady Jane made him catch his breath like the shock of a cold bath. There was something of triumph, nevertheless, in the consciousness that he had hoisted the flag of freedom at last, and found, perhaps to-night by the merest accident, far more than he looked for in those young days of weakness, folly, and despair. How delightful it would be to install her at Royston, to take her to London, to introduce her to Lady Jane? No. Already he had so far forgotten the ghost of his departed love that he felt perfectly indifferent whether Lady Jane grudged him his happiness or not!

A man must marry some time, he decided. Would he ever see a woman so likely to suit him, supposing, of course, that she proved as charming as she looked? And why not? The face was surely an index to the character. Such soft and beautiful hair, too, must necessarily accompany an amiable disposition and well-stored mind. His thoughts were running away with him, galloping headlong down-hill, and had reached altar and honeymoon, when they were suddenly pulled up by a consideration that ought to have presented itself sooner. "What if she were married already?" How he cursed his stupidity not to have scrutinised her left hand for the plain gold ring that tells its

respectable tale. Yes, of course, she must be married; that accounted for her travelling by herself, her quiet independence of manner, her dining alone in the coffee-room of an hotel. She came to meet her husband, who would probably arrive by the last train, and there was an end of the whole thing! As he dashed the stump of his cigar into the fireless grate, he could not help laughing aloud to think how quickly he had planned, built, furnished, and annihilated his castle in the air! Yet passing 46 in the passage on his way to bed he could not help looking wistfully at the closed door, with its painted numerals, wondering the while how he could be such a fool!

Roy was an early riser. The habit, acquired in warmer climates than our own, is got rid of with difficulty, even in England, where many of us lose something like fourteen hours, or one working day, in the week, by persistently lying in bed till eight o'clock. On his dreams it is needless to speculate, sleep does not always continue the thread of our waking thoughts; but he turned out at seven, and by half-past was shaking the cold salt water from eyes, ears, and nostrils, as he came up after a glorious "header," and struck out for the open sea.

He was a fair swimmer, but distances are deceiving for a naked man in the Channel, so that a few hundred yards out and in again were as much as he cared to accomplish before breakfast. Climbing into his machine, he experienced that sensation of renewed vigour in body and mind which is never so delightful as after the first of our morning dips, if we are prudent enough not to stay in the sea too long!

Walking home, through the market, with a

furious appetite for breakfast, all the despondency of yesterday had vanished, and even the infatuation of last night seemed but a dream.

Royston was no longer a dull and moated grange, in which life meant stagnation; a country gentleman's duties and occupations assumed the importance which everything really possesses that is done heartily and for a good motive. John Roy himself had become an enviable person, with far better luck than he deserved; and this fresh, quiet Beachmouth a charming little watering-place where he would remain just long enough to enjoy his holiday, and return to homely duties refreshed, invigorated, altogether a new man. If No. 46 crossed his mind, it was only that he might picture her to himself eating prawns with her legal mate at a coffee-room breakfast, smiling and comely, no doubt, but not half so pretty as she looked the night before.

Proceeding upstairs to his own apartment he necessarily passed her door. On its threshold rested a dear little pair of boots, left out last night to be cleaned, and brought back this morning, in company with a can of warm water. It was obvious they belonged to a very pretty foot, slim and supple, hollow and arched, that trod, light and even, on a thin sole and a low heel. For a man who admired pretty feet it was impossible to pass these boots without further examination. John Roy could not resist the temptation, and stooped to pick one up.

Now the chambermaid, not wishing to go more errands than necessary, had left a letter for No. 46, cunningly balanced on that lady's *chaussure*: was it quite inexcusable that Mr. Roy should have turned it over in his hand, or that

his heart should have made a great leap when he read the address—

"Miss Burton,
Imperial Hotel,
Beachmouth,"

written legibly enough in a plain, clerk-like, current hand? Miss Burton! She was free then, this goddess, unmarried at anyrate, though it would be too much to suppose that she could be without suitors. Still, give him a fair field and no favour, why should his chance be worse than another's? All the folly of last night, that he thought had been washed out by sea-water, came back with a rush; he lifted one of the little boots in a tender, almost a reverent, hand; but for footsteps in the passage he would have defied blacking and pressed it to his lips.

Instead of kissing, he dropped it like a hot potato, and hurried off to complete his toilet, with a light tread and a bounding pulse, but the fine appetite for breakfast completely gone.

CHAPTER III

NO. 46

HE was just in time. His own scarcely closed, before the door of 46 opened, and a bright, handsome face peeped out, followed by a round white arm, that drew letter, boots, and water-can into the room. Miss Burton then desisted from the sleeking of her dark locks, and proceeded to read the following communication :—

"MONDAY EVENING,
"CORNER HOTEL, CORNER STREET, STRAND.

"MY DEAR NELLY,—You were disappointed. In course you must have been disappointed, though I make no account of disappointments myself, being well used to them. But you are young, which makes it different. Well, my dear, the cabman was sulky, and his poor horse lame, and I *had* very little time to spare, there's no denying it, so we missed the train. Why didn't I come by the next? I'll tell you. The moment I got home, meaning to take a cup of tea and a fresh start, what should I find at the door but four arrivals, and one of them a family of eight, with a baby not short-coated, bless it, as hungry as a little hawk. Nothing ready, not so much as a mouthful of toast for the lot. Maria is no more use than a post; and when I think of how you would have helped me, my dear, in such a muddle, I could sit down and cry. Why, in *your* time, a queen might have eaten off the kitchen floor, and now, I declare, I am ashamed for the strange servants to go into the offices. Even them foreign couriers turn up their noses when they pass in and out; and to be untidy, as well you know, is the one thing that makes me mad. However, I am such a one to bustle when I'm really put to it, that I had them all settled and comfortable before the gas was turned on; but it was too late to start for Beachmouth then. I never believed much in telegraphs since the Government took them in hand, so I thought I'd drop you a line by post, my dear, to tell you all, how and about it.

"I made sure of being off first thing in the morning, but we're poor blind creatures, the sharpest of us, and half an hour back, Fanny, that's the new under-housemaid, and a precious lazy one she is, comes tapping at the door, and 'If you please, ma'am,' says she, 'Miss Collins is took bad,' says she; and will you believe it, my dear, there was Maria fainted dead away on the stairs, and forced to be put to bed at once, and a doctor sent for and all! Till he has been, I don't know what's the matter, nor how long a job it will be, nor when I shall get down and join you, no more than the dead. That's why I'm writing in such a hurry to save the post, so please excuse mistakes and always believe me,—Your affectionate aunt,

"MATILDA PHIPPS."

"*P.S.*—My head isn't worth twopence, I'm that worried and put about. Now I've forgot to say, you'd better keep your mind easy, and stay where you are—the change will do you good. If things go well, I might be with you on Saturday, at soonest. I can tell you these fine autumn days make me long for a blow of the sea-breezes and a walk by the seaside. Good-bye."

After reading the above production more than once, Miss Burton pulled her purse from under the pillow, and counted her money—gold, silver, copper, and a bank-note. She then completed her toilet, took in a breakfast-tray left at the door, disposed of its contents with a healthy appetite, arranged her writing-case on the lid of a trunk, and, in a most uncomfortable attitude, produced the following reply:—

"TUESDAY MORNING,
"No. 46, IMPERIAL HOTEL, BEACHMOUTH.

"DEAR AUNT MATILDA,—Mind you ask for No. 46 when you arrive. It means *me*. I'm like a convict, only without a brass ring, and the people of the hotel wouldn't know me by any other name. I hope you will be here soon; you *would* enjoy it. From my window I have such a lovely view of the sea, and this morning I was woke by the tide coming in. It sounded so fresh and healthy. I wonder anybody lives away from the seaside; not but I was very happy with you in Corner Street. I like to think I am of use, and one is very useful, I suppose, managing an hotel. If poor Miss Collins keeps bad, I will come back whenever you wish. I don't want to be independent, dear auntie, and the money left me by Cousin William I would willingly join to yours, if you thought it a good plan, as I told you from the first. However, in the meantime, we will hope to enjoy ourselves for a fortnight at the least in this beautiful and romantic

place. Not that I have seen much of it yet; but directly I have posted this I mean to be off for a long walk by the sea. It seems like another world, and yet I am sure I don't know why. This hotel is comfortable enough, but I could teach them a few things, I daresay, though to be sure we Londoners are apt to expect too much. Country folks must be a little behindhand, I suppose. How you would laugh if you were to find me settled in the bar, taking the orders and posting the books. Wouldn't it seem like old times?

"I was glad you told me to travel first-class, as I had a carriage all to myself, except for two gentlemen, who got out half-way. I never was much of a one to take notice of the men, and, though they stared more than was polite, we scarcely exchanged a word. I dined in the coffee-room, where there were very few people. If it wasn't for the sea I should be dull enough; but I hope to have you here in a day or two, when we will take some famous walks, and perhaps, if it is very smooth, go out for a sail. In the meantime I shall stay where I am, dear auntie, till I hear from you again, and remain always,—Your grateful and affectionate niece,

"ELINOR BURTON."

Having stamped her letter, Miss Burton put on a killing little straw hat, armed herself with an umbrella, and sallied forth to the post office, light of step and blithe of heart, little knowing, like the rest of us, what a day might bring forth.

It must not be supposed that this lady, though filling a social position no higher than the management of an hotel owned and superintended by her aunt, was therefore deficient in education or unrefined in feelings. Her father was a bookseller, her mother a governess. Such a combination inferred a moderate share of education and accomplishments. She could play the pianoforte, speak French, calculate figures, order dinner, see that it was properly cooked, check tradespeople, manage servants, and wrote, moreover, the most beautiful Italian hand imaginable—clear, precise, and fluent, it seemed no unworthy index of her character.

She was now near thirty, and had of course received a fair amount of attention. She might have counted her offers, as tumblers of punch are

counted in Ireland, on the fingers of both hands. Hitherto she had escaped without a wound, almost without a scratch. Well-to-do tradesmen sued in vain. A rising artist, a popular actor, were rejected, kindly but firmly, and Nelly, in the prime of womanhood, could as yet find nobody exactly to her taste. Mrs. Phipps, the aunt who had taken care of her since her mother's death, began to fear that she was destined for an old maid. Recalling her own youth, and its comparative scarcity of suitors, she wondered how her niece could be so impenetrable, and when, under the will of a cousin deceased, Miss Burton became possessed of a small independent fortune, the elder lady, arguing against her own interests and convenience, urged on the younger the propriety of at last settling in life.

Nelly did not seem to see it. When she could find leisure, and occasion offered, she was a reader of novels and a dreamer of dreams, though clear-headed and firm of purpose. She was also a thorough woman, and cherished deep in her heart those generous impulses of affection and romance which make much of a woman's pleasure in life, and all her pain. She had formed her ideal hero, who in no way resembled the men she was in the habit of meeting in her aunt's private sitting-room, or at the bar of the Corner Hotel, Corner Street, Strand. She had not settled exactly what he *was*, but had made up her mind what he was *not*.

In business? No. A mere idler? No. Young, slim, and genteel? No. Short, stout, and well-to-do? A thousand times no. Rather, a man of a certain age, a certain standing, who had seen the world, and thought things out, and been unhappy—perhaps about some other woman. She wouldn't mind that, a sore heart was better than none at all;

and—and—she felt if she really loved him, she could console him for anything!

When we think of woman's nature—excitable, imaginative, and in its affections wholly unreasonable; when we think of a girl's dreams—tender, unselfish, and thoroughly unattainable—the wonder is, not that here and there we shall find an unhappy marriage, but that any two people, thoroughly disappointed and undeceived, should be able to tolerate each other kindly and comfortably to the end. Even for men there is an awakening from the rosy dream, usually within two years; but they have so many interests and occupations into which the affections do not enter, that they prosper well enough without these superfluities, and prefer, I believe, the bracing air and enforced activity of the working world, to an oppressive atmosphere and irksome repose in a fool's paradise. But it is far different with their wives. Piece by piece the woman sees her knight stripped of his golden armour; feather by feather does her love-bird moult its painted plumes; and the lower he falls in her estimation, the higher this disappointing mate seems to rise in his own. He kissed her feet while she thought him a prince, he tramples on her now she knows him a clown. After taming an eagle, it does seem humiliating to be coerced by an owl.

And there is no salvage; all her cargo is gone down in one ship. Is it wonderful that she looks abroad over the dreary waters with a blank face and a troubled eye? Women are deceived over and over again. They like it; but even the pure gold never rings quite true in their ears when they have once been cheated by the counterfeit coin.

It seems an ungenerous sentiment, but I think

that man is wise who does not allow his wife to know him thoroughly ; who keeps back a reserve of strength, of authority, even of affection, for the hour of need, causing her to feel that there are depths in his character she has not yet sounded, heights she has not scaled. Thus can he indulge and keep alive her feline propensity to prowl, and pounce, and capture ; thus will he remain an object of interest, of anxiety, of devotion ; thus will she continue to see him through the coloured glass of her own imagination ; and it will be the happier for both, because when affection goes to sleep in security it is apt to forget all about waking, and those are the most enduring attachments in which the woman loves best of the two.

In the meantime Nelly has posted her letter, and paid the penny that entitled her to inhale sea-breezes on the pier.

It is an autumn day—delightful at the seaside—with a bright sun, a crisp air, and a curl on the shining waters. All the visitors at Beachmouth seem to have turned out, though it is hardly eleven o'clock ; but in the hundred or so of strangers who constitute this accidental population there are none to be compared with Miss Burton.

Even the ladies stare at her as she walks on, and admit, frankly enough, that she "has a fine figure for people who admire that style. What a pity she must become coarse, even blowsy, in a year or two ; and after all, it's very easy to be good-looking, with dark eyes, and all that quantity of hair, probably false!"

The approval of the men, however, is unanimous. One youth, wearing a complete shooting-suit that will never go out shooting, passes, repasses, looks, leers, and seems about to speak ; but Nelly is used

to admiration, considering it, like beef or mutton, unpalatable unless properly cooked, and, looking straight before her, gives him to understand by her bearing that she is the last person with whom he may presume to take a liberty.

Then she establishes herself at the extreme end of the jetty, as far out at sea as she can get, perhaps three hundred feet, and, pulling some work from her pocket, gives herself up to the full enjoyment of air and scenery, with no more self-consciousness than the grey gull flapping and fishing not a cable's length from where she sits. Meanwhile John Roy, deceived by a dress and *chignon*, has walked two miles along the beach in pursuit of a figure that sets his heart beating while he overtakes it, but on nearer inspection turns out to be an elderly lady, ordered strong exercise for her health, who meets his disappointed stare with a perfectly unmeaning smile, and a face shining in perspiration under the noonday sun.

CHAPTER IV

DEEPER AND DEEPER

EVENTS seldom come off exactly as people anticipate; yet the odds are longer than we think on the success of a man who expends all his energies in pursuit of any one object, great or small.

The old foxhunter's advice, "Keep your temper and stick to the line," is a golden rule for the conduct of more serious affairs than bringing "the little red rover" to hand after all the delights and uncertainties of a run. If we carry on the metaphor into a love-chase, we shall find it even more appropriate to the gardens of Venus than the woodlands of Diana. Command of temper is everything in dealing with a woman's caprice; and that undeviating persistency which men call pigheadedness, and gods perseverance, seldom fails, sooner or later, to come up with and capture its prey. John Roy resolved to keep his temper, though he had overrun the line; and like a thorough woodsman, adapting his tactics to the habits of his game, he determined to "try back" without loss of time. But the pier was deserted when he arrived there, and he sat down to consider his next move, disappointed rather than disheartened. As he told himself, with something of sarcasm, "He was only hotter on it than before."

The tide would be out in the afternoon. He reflected that no woman, on her first day at the seaside, could resist the temptation of wetting her feet in the little pools of salt water left, as if on purpose, by its ebb.

So after luncheon he watched, patiently enough, and having seen his friend of the morning packed into a watering-place fly, felt confident he would be deceived by that staunch pedestrian no more.

Presently he was rewarded. Not ten paces from the rock where he had settled himself 46 came stepping jauntily by, looking steadfastly seaward, while she drank in the fresh briny air with a thirst engendered by long months of London smoke and gas.

He could not but observe how true were the lines of her undulating figure, how firmly she planted her foot, how nobly she carried her head, how smooth and level was her gait, as she stepped bravely out across the sand.

"Watch, and your chance comes!" muttered Roy, throwing away the cigar he was in the act of lighting; for an occasion offered itself when least expected, and he seized it without diffidence or hesitation. Two children, enjoying, as only children can, the delight of wooden spades and low water, had wandered, I need hardly say, to the extreme verge of safety, and far beyond dry rocks in pursuit of the receding waves. Barefooted and kilted high above their fat little knees, they shouted, screamed, and splashed to their hearts' content, while the nurse, seated under an umbrella with her back to them, was lost in the pages of a novel. They were boy and girl, the latter being the younger, and, if possible, the wilder of the two. In her frolics she found herself parted

from her brother, and to her young perceptions cut off from society in general by a runlet of water nearly two feet deep. Becoming gradually alive to the horrors of her situation, she grasped her frock tight in both hands and roared with all her might. The boy, who, perhaps, was turned four, made some slight offer at a rescue, but the intervening gulf seemed too much for him, and he also set up a hideous outcry, while the nurse read calmly on.

Nelly loved children. Glancing on each side to make sure she was unobserved, but neglecting in her hurry to look back, she pulled her boots and stockings off in a few seconds, caught up her garments as best she might, and was wading knee-deep to the rescue before John Roy could interfere.

How handsome she looked, hugging the frightened child in her arms, and soothing it with that beautiful instinct of maternity which pervades her whole sex from the first moment they are big enough to handle a doll.

With hurried apologies and some blushing on both sides—for Roy was already hard hit, and Nelly had certainly been caught in déshabillé—he took possession of the little girl, now completely reassured, and carried her safe to the nurse, studiously turning his back on Miss Burton while she resumed her stockings. "He is a gentleman," thought Nelly, "every inch of him. I daresay he's a good fellow too, he seems so fond of children."

Such an introduction was equivalent to a week's acquaintance. With a little shyness, a little hesitation and incoherence of speech, the gentleman and lady managed to communicate their respective

names, and to digest the startling intelligence that they were staying at the same hotel, that it was comfortable but might be cleaner, that the sea-air made one hungry, and the roar of the tide kept one awake—all which facts were self-evident, and in no way accounted for the low tones, grave accents, or downcast glances with which they were propounded and received.

It seemed imprudent, too, for people with wet feet to walk home at an exceedingly slow pace, and halt so repeatedly on the way.

Each thought the distance had been much longer, and both said so at the same moment. Then came more bowing, more blushing, an abortive attempt at shaking hands, and an imbecile, unmeaning kind of parting, that left John Roy standing in the entrance-hall with his mouth open and his heart in it, while Nelly hurried upstairs to take refuge in 46.

Her first impulse, though by no means a vain person, was to look in the glass. What she saw there caused her to smile, sigh, and shake her head. Then she sat down on the bed to think.

Mr. Roy, on the other hand, turned into the coffee-room, and ordered dinner for seven o'clock, with an indifference to the bill of fare that disgusted, and a positiveness that surprised, the waiter—securing also a table near the clock, at one end of the room.

For the next two or three days everything "went upon wheels." If people are inclined to like each other and live in the same hotel at a small watering-place it is probable they will meet many times in the twenty-four hours. Twice, at least, between breakfast and dinner, on the pier, without counting accidental encounters on the

stairs, in the streets, under the portico of the Circulating Library, by the ebb and flow of the soothing tide, or at sunset on the beach. It is surprising how soon an idea, canvassed, cherished, and combated by turns, takes entire possession of the mind. The first day of their acquaintance Mr. Roy and Miss Burton felt that a new element of interest had entered into life. The second, they were perfectly happy — quiet, contented, asking nothing better than to remain undisturbed. The third, both had grown restless, fidgety, dissatisfied, and a crisis was near.

It had become an established custom that they should meet in their walks—they had even started together from the hotel. On one occasion, however, Miss Burton went out by herself, and took up a position at the extreme end of the pier. As she stated openly that this was her favourite resort, it is not surprising Mr. Roy should have followed with no more delay than was required to run upstairs and get his hat.

The band had ceased playing, children and nurses were gone home to dinner, these two had the pier to themselves. Perhaps that was why they became so silent, so preoccupied, believing they were perfectly happy, yet feeling somewhat ill at ease.

After the first meeting, a hypocritical "good-morning," that had already been exchanged in the hotel corridor, neither spoke for two or three minutes, which seemed like two or three hours. Nelly had forgotten her work, Roy did not even attempt to smoke, and they sat side by side staring at a grey gull who stuck diligently to his fishing, without noticing a feather of his wings.

"Miss Burton, shouldn't you like to be a gull?"

asked Roy presently, with a much more serious face than the question seemed to require.

"Mr. Roy, shouldn't you like to be a goose?" was the reply that naturally presented itself, but Nelly only answered, in rather a shaking voice, "Yes, I should, because it can stay at the seaside as long as it likes."

"And can't *you*?" said Roy, taking the alarm.

She shook her head.

"I don't live here, you know. I only came down for a visit; and I have dawdled on, expecting my aunt to fetch me home. I am afraid now she will be prevented. And—and—I think I ought to go back to London at once"; the last in a low tone, looking steadfastly out to sea.

"Don't you like Beachmouth?"

"Oh yes; very much."

"Haven't you been happy since you came here?"

"Yes; very happy. I am so fond of the sea-air, and the bathing, and the walks on the sands. I have enjoyed it extremely; I shall be quite sorry to go away."

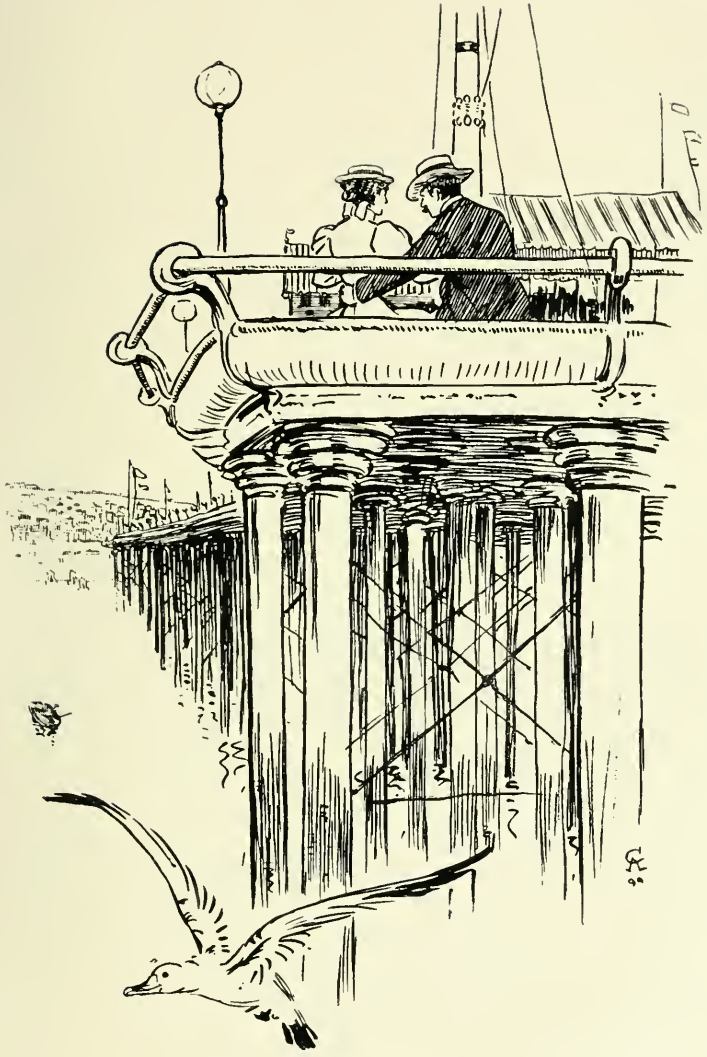
"Only for that?"

Her head was averted. She felt her heart beating fast, and the colour rising scarlet to her face.

"Miss Burton."

No answer.

"Miss Burton," he repeated, clearing his voice with a husky little cough, "I hope, I say I *hope*, there is something here you will be sorry to leave besides the bathing and the sands. I cannot expect you to feel about it as I do; but—but—whether you go or stay, I must tell you the truth. Ever since the first night I saw you at dinner,—I—I have thought you the handsomest, and the dearest, and the nicest woman in the world."



Let me go please

"Lor'!"

Was it a disillusion? He hardly knew. Lady Jane, he remembered, under similar circumstances, exclaimed, "How *can* you be so foolish?" But at anyrate he had got the steam on, and it was too late to stop now.

"I have not much to offer," he continued. "I am many years older than you. I am asking a great deal, with little to give in return. You will say we hardly know each other; but I should not be the least afraid for the future if you thought you could learn to like me after a while. Perhaps I ought to have waited longer before speaking, but when you said you were going away it put me off my guard. I could not bear to lose my second chance in life. It is only right to tell you. I know what disappointment is; I loved another woman once."

"Only once?"

He knew he was winning now, and stole his hand into hers. "Only once," he repeated; "and it was many years ago. If you would be my wife, I would try to make you happy. Do you think, *don't* you think, Miss Burton, if I tried very hard I might succeed?"

"Don't call me Miss Burton. People I like call me Nelly."

"And you like *me*?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you will learn to love me in time?" His arm was round her waist now, and her head rested on his shoulder.

"I've learned it already. I've loved you ever so long. Ever since the day before yesterday. Let go of me, please, there's somebody coming on the pier!"

CHAPTER V

A WOMAN'S REASON

FOR the last few days Miss Burton had sadly neglected her only correspondent. It was so difficult to write without alluding to the subject that filled her heart, and she had never kept anything from Aunt Matilda in her life. Now she could tell triumphantly and without reserve what a lucky woman she was, and how happy. Dear auntie would be so pleased and so proud when she learned that her niece was going to be a real lady. I am afraid Nelly called it "a lady of position." How auntie would admire Mr. Roy! his well-cut clothes, his upright figure, his white hands, and his gallant bearing. She would declare he looked like a lord; and so he did, as there was no earthly reason why he should not. It seemed impossible to realise the fact that she, Nelly Burton, was going to belong to this paragon, this phœnix, this king of men! How she loved him, how she doted on him, now that it was no longer humiliating nor unwomanly to admit her affection! Every line of his worn face, every turn of his manly figure, every tone of his quiet, decided voice, suggested

the breeding, the education, and the unconscious self-respect of a gentleman. Yes, to the bookseller's daughter, in this consisted his irresistible attraction. He was the embodiment of her ideal, and that ideal had always presented itself as identified with a higher social class than her own. He was the realisation of her dreams, and if she might belong to him, nay, as she *must* belong to him, how could she worship him enough? What an exquisite and subtle flattery was conveyed in his confession that she had fascinated him at once; that he, who might take his choice, as she implicitly believed, of all the ladies at Her Majesty's drawing-room, should have fallen in love with her, so he declared, from the moment he saw the back of her head. This was surely love at first sight, of which she had read, and heard, and pondered, but never hoped to experience the charm. It seemed as if nobody had a right to be so happy, and she walked up and down the room in a transport that was only modified by those vague misgivings, that shadowy sense of uncertainty, with which, from the very constitution of our nature, must be tempered all extremes of earthly joy. Then she fell on her knees to thank God, with wet eyes, for her exceeding happiness, and so, in a more composed frame of mind, took out her blotting-book and wrote a letter to her aunt.

"DEAREST AUNTIE,—I have such a piece of news! You will never guess, not if you try for a month. You must have wondered why I wrote so seldom, and thought me the most ungrateful minx in the world. No; you would never think that. But you may have fancied I was ill. If so, forgive me for having caused you a moment's anxiety. Dear auntie, I feel as if I should never be ill again. I am so happy; *so* happy! Do you remember the American gentleman who declared the whole of out-of-doors wasn't big enough to contain his disgust? Well, I feel exactly the same about my

happiness. I certainly am the luckiest girl, or rather the luckiest woman, in the universe!

"You have often told me I ought to marry, and I always said, No. It used to seem such an easy word. But I couldn't have got it out to-day if my life depended on it, and that little syllable once spoken would have made two people miserable for ever. Anyhow, I can answer for *one*! But I am keeping you on tenterhooks when I ought to make my confession. Dearest auntie, I am going to be married! There! Now the cat is out of the bag! And to the noblest, the dearest, the kindest, the handsomest of men. To explain it all I must begin at the beginning.

"The night I came here—it seems such a long time ago now, and it isn't really more than a week—I asked to have some tea upstairs, but I saw they didn't want to send it, so I ordered dinner in the coffee-room, smoothed my hair, and went down, not best pleased to think I should find myself alone amongst a lot of strangers. Would you believe it, only three other tables were laid, and I sat with my back to them all, so I had my dinner comfortable without noticing anybody. There was one gentleman I couldn't help seeing when I got up to go away, and I won't deny that I thought him a fine, straight-made fellow, with white hands, dark eyes, and hair just turning grey; but I didn't notice him much, as you may suppose. However, I *do* believe there is a fate in these things. The very next day I had an adventure, and Mr. Roy—that's his name, auntie, you'll know it better soon—appeared as the hero. I was down on the sands, you may be sure, and I happened to see a child hemmed in by streams of salt water that would have reached to its poor little neck. Such a darling, auntie, with great blue eyes and beautiful fair hair! Well, I don't like to think of it even now, but I whipped my boots and stockings off, and waded in at once to this poor little Robinson Crusoe, thinking nobody was looking, or, perhaps, not thinking at all, for the child seemed so frightened there was no time to lose. I soon had it in my arms, hiding its dear little face on my shoulder, and there was Mr. Roy, splashing through the water, clothes and all, to take it from me and carry it to the nurse. I thought I should have dropped, only one never *does* drop, I felt so put out and ashamed that a gentleman should have caught me without shoes and stockings, like a barefooted gipsy swinging on a gate. Dear fellow! He has confessed since he watched me all the way from the hotel. I didn't know it then. I suppose I should have been very angry, but I am not angry the least. I shall never be angry with *him* all my life now.

"We walked home together, and though he was very kind and polite, hoping I would not take cold with my wetting, he didn't say much. I never supposed that he thought of me for a moment, at least in *that* way, till to-day.

"I'm not going to deny that I admired him, and was foolish enough to wish sometimes there could be a chance of our meeting after I left Beachmouth; but I kept my wishes to myself, and didn't even tell *you*, dear auntie, what a silly I could be when I am old enough to know better. And yet, as things have turned out, I wasn't such a great silly after all.

"You have been married yourself, auntie, and had lots of followers, I daresay, before you changed your name, so you know how it all comes about. At first it only seemed strange and rather pleasant to meet Mr. Roy by accident wherever I went; then I began to think he did it on purpose, and I felt I ought not to encourage him. One day I walked right away into the country, but I couldn't resist turning back at the first milestone when I thought of his disappointed face hunting for me all over the beach and the pier. Then I knew I was beginning to care for him, and I determined to go away from here at once.

"That was only yesterday; and to-day everything is different. I went to the window after breakfast, and watched him out of the house, as I said to myself for the *last* time, meaning directly his back was turned to take my walk in an opposite direction.

"I cried a little; I'm not ashamed to confess it now. Wasn't it stupid? And I shall be thirty next birthday. When he was fairly started I bathed my eyes, put on my hat, and trudged off to the pier. There was no harm in taking a last look at everything, but I felt very *down*, though I had quite made up my mind to go.

"I wonder how he knew! I hadn't been there ten minutes before I heard his step. I didn't need to turn my head; I can tell his walk among a thousand; and it seemed so natural for him to sit down by me and look at the sea, that I could have burst out crying again when I thought it was for the *last* time.

"I don't know how he come to say it, auntie, but he *did* say it. I don't know exactly what he said, and if I could repeat it I shouldn't, even to *you*; but he confessed he cared very much for me, and asked me to be his wife. That's enough, and more than enough, for me!

"Nothing is settled. Most likely it's too great happiness and will never be—that won't influence *my* feelings. I promised him faithful, and if I am not to belong to him I'll belong to nobody, and die an old maid.

"So now I have told you all about it. There is little more to be said. I think I ought to leave this at once. It will be too late to get an answer, or I would ask your advice, though a woman don't want anybody to advise her in such a matter as this. I shall be off by the early train to-morrow morning; you will not be taken by surprise, as this ought to reach you first post. If Mr. Roy means fair he will soon follow. When I say 'if,' don't suppose I have any doubts. Could I believe he was false, I think I should just pay my penny once more, walk to the end of the pier, and never come back again!

"What a long letter! Wish me joy when I see you to-morrow, and believe me,—Always your loving niece,

"ELINOR BURTON."

No date of course, but crossed, and re-crossed, and filled to the edges. When Miss Burton had slipped it into the hotel letter-box she returned

to her room, and spent the rest of the evening packing up her clothes.

John Roy, wandering to and fro like a disturbed spirit, felt grievously hurt and discomposed that, after an interview which had such decided results, he should see no more of his promised wife during the rest of the day. Though a man cultivates less subtle feeling of delicacy than a woman, his better nature told him she was right. Nevertheless, like the rest of us when we are dissatisfied with our gourd, he followed the example of Jonah, and thought he "did well to be angry."

His wrath, however, was mollified, and the reaction made him more in love than ever when, going to his room before dinner, he found a pretty little note pinned on his toilet-cover, the address of which was written in the clearest and most beautiful characters ever beheld. He kissed it once *before* reading it; I should be afraid to say how often after.

"My dear Sir, or

"My dear Mr. Roy, or

"My dear Friend,—What am I to call you? Do not be surprised that I write a few lines, instead of seeing you before I go, to say good-bye. I cannot explain why, but I feel that after what took place to-day I ought to return home at once. I hope you will not be hurt, and I am sure you will not be offended. I think, on reflection, it is what you would like me to do yourself. I shall not go down to dinner, and I shall leave to-morrow morning for my aunt's house, Corner Hotel, Corner Street, Strand. I wonder whether you will remember the address. Even if you do not, even if I am never to see you again, believe me always so long as I live,—
Your own Nelly.

"*P.S.*—It is rather an early start. I must be at the station by 7.30."

She *was* at the station by 7.30, and so was Mr. Roy. Having ascertained, we need not inquire how, that Miss Burton drank tea with the landlady

the previous evening, who afterwards assisted in finishing her packing and saw her safe to bed, he had the good taste to anticipate her at the station instead of accompanying her from the hotel, and made his farewell on the platform, where indeed at that early hour there were but few lookers-on.

"And when shall I see you again?" said he, after a warm though hurried renewal of certain protestations that he felt had been unjustly curtailed.

"It depends on yourself," was the reply, while she gave him both hands with a look of confidence and affection that made her handsomer than ever. "I shall wait for you at my aunt's—waiting—always waiting; if you never come, I shall wait for you just the same."

"I *hate* waiting," said he. "If I had my own way, you shouldn't wait a minute. Why can't I get my ticket and go with you now?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Why?" she repeated. "I am sure I don't know *why*. And yet I feel it would put me in a false position; you see, it would not be right."

"I *don't* see. Why wouldn't it?"

"Because it wouldn't!" And though this was a woman's reason, it seemed to him convincing and unanswerable, as based on some instinct of truth deeper and more infallible than all the inductions of philosophy and all the wisdom of the schools.

CHAPTER VI

SO LIKE A MAN!

STORM and calm, rain and sunshine, bitter and sweet, action and reaction, are not these the conditions of life? If the wind is fair to-day, look for it in your teeth to-morrow; what is earned by the right hand you are bound to spend with the left; and never expect to be four by honours in two deals running!

Who so happy as an accepted lover? He treads on air, he mounts to the skies, and he soars on the wings of a dove, believing firmly that he has abjured the wisdom of the serpent for evermore. Yet, after the first access of transport, every succeeding moment brings him down, nearer and nearer the ground, till at last he walks about again on two legs, like a husband, or a goose, or any other biped, having neither energy nor inclination to fly.

I need not say that John Roy bade adieu to Beachmouth, betook himself to Charing Cross Station, and proceeded thence to the Corner Hotel, Corner Street, Strand, without loss of time. The distance was short. He could almost have wished it longer, that he might gain more time to realise the step he had taken.

Like most English gentlemen, he was a bold fellow enough on a horse, in a row, under any circumstances of risk to life or limb, but he was

also sensitive and shy, particularly with inferiors, shrinking from their approaches as a timid woman shrinks from observation and personal address.

It was not reassuring to find the hotel door blocked up by an arrival, or to be told without hesitation, by a supercilious waiter in yesterday's white neckcloth, that they were full to the garrets, and hadn't a bed unoccupied; while he volunteered, with something of reproof, the further information that this was a private hotel, and if the gentleman expected to find accommodation he should have written to Mrs. Phipps at least a week ago.

"But I don't want a room," said John Roy, out of patience; "I came here to call on Miss—I mean, is Miss Phipps at home?"

"Mrs. Phipps is engaged."

"Go and tell her that a gentleman wishes to see her particularly, and will not detain her five minutes."

John Roy was peremptory, not to say stern; but the waiter stood to his guns.

"Any name, sir?" as if a man without a portmanteau must also be without a name.

The visitor wished he had brought a card-case.

"Mr. Roy," said he; "and be so good as to go at once. I don't choose to be kept waiting half an hour on the doorstep."

But Nelly, who was already in the passage, flew to the threshold, and welcomed him with such warmth and cordiality as completely reassured the waiter.

"I *knew* you would come!" she whispered. "I have been expecting you all the morning. This way. Mind the step. Don't run against the coal-box. We're so full, we have been driven

downstairs. We generally live in the front dining-room. Now, I'll bring you in, and show you to auntie."

The charm was working again, and at high pressure. So lovely, so loving, so bright, so beautiful, above all, so glad to see him. Who would not have followed such a guide down the darkest passages, the most inconvenient stairs that ever smelt of mould, soap, sawdust, stale coffee, and early dinner?

Mrs. Phipps was an excellent woman, no doubt —clear-headed, bustling, full of energy, a capital accountant, sincere, sensible, with a heart of gold— but she was *not* exactly the sort of person John Roy would have selected for his wife's aunt.

He had a keen sense of the ludicrous, and as she came forward, rubbing one hand over the other, to stop in front of him, with a profound curtsey, he took in her exterior at a glance. The dark dress, looking dingier in the obscurity of a room on the basement, lighted from a grating in the pavement outside; the portliness of figure, increasing as it travelled upward to the chin; the large brooch, the bright gold chain, the jet ornaments twinkling in a solemn headgear, black, pompous, and funereal as the artificial tresses it surmounted, and the plain oblong face, with just so much resemblance to Nelly as might create a vague and morbid fear lest her bright young beauty should ever turn to this!

He made the best of it, and put out both hands.

"You are to be *my* aunt, too," said he. "Miss Burton has told you everything, of course. I am always going to call her Nelly for the future, and you must learn to look upon me as a relation of your own."

He was not prepared for the result. Mrs.

Phipps burst out crying, and put her arms round his neck.

After this little ebullition she became practical enough. "I'm sure it's a great honour," said she, "and a great happiness to us all. It's what I never expected, and yet Nelly *do* deserve the best that ever wore shoe-leather, and I always said so. She was a good daughter, Mr. Roy, was Nelly, and a good niece. I'm sure I've reason to know it, and she'll make a good wife to the man who will be kind to her. I can see in your face as you're one of that sort. I'm a plain-spoken woman, Mr. Roy; I never had the manners of my niece there, nor yet the education. I've my bread to get, as I may say, by hard and honest work; but you won't think the worse of us, I hope; and you won't take it as a liberty if I say, 'God bless you both!' and I should like to shake you by the hand, Mr. Roy, once more."

So this ceremony was repeated, and Roy acknowledged to himself that the good old woman who had educated his betrothed wife was a thorough lady at heart, although she spoke second-class English and kept an hotel.

"You'll take a glass of wine, Mr. Roy," continued his hostess, relapsing into her commonplace mood. "I wish I could ask you to stop to dinner, but Nelly and me has had our dinner, and you couldn't hardly see to eat it neither in so dark a place as this. I wish I wasn't so put about for room. But what am I to do? You can't turn people away from the doors if you keep an hotel."

"Mr. Roy never takes wine in the daytime, auntie," said Nelly, assuming entire charge of his habits, as became a woman engaged for more than

twenty-four hours. "We can give him a cup of tea in five minutes, and I'll make it myself; I know what he likes better than you do."

But Mr. Roy preferred a walk with Nelly to refreshment of any kind, and the pair were soon strolling arm-in-arm along that romantic thoroughfare the Strand, discussing *trousseaux*, wedding, honeymoon, their eventual future. What do I know? What do people talk about when they are going to be married and lead a new life?

So the weeks went on. John Roy found himself waking morning after morning with a strange, anxious feeling that he was yet a day nearer his fate, sometimes impatient to get it over, sometimes thinking he could wait as long as he pleased, but never wavering in his loyalty to Nelly, nor allowing for one second that he regretted his choice.

It was the dead time of year. "Not a soul in London," said the souls who met the other souls in the street; yet is the Great City seldom so empty, even of rich and idle, but that ten or twelve can be got together for a dinner-party at short notice. There *are* people who profess they like these little gatherings better than the crowd and hurry of the season, declaring that they never enjoy the society of their friends so thoroughly as when "there is nobody in town!"

In St. James's Street and Pall Mall might be found a few lingerers, dull and torpid as the winter flies on a window-pane, but the Park seemed unusually deserted. Perhaps for that reason it was the chosen resort of Mr. Roy and Miss Burton, who would turn in at Albert Gate, having arrived there, as became a regularly engaged couple, in a hansom cab, to walk in the Ride, or sit down and make plans for the future, while she looked in his

face with adoring eyes, and he—well—he smoked, and let her look.

"I *like* this," whispered Nelly, pressing closer to his side as they returned one day from an hour or two of the above engrossing occupation. "You and me have got it all to ourselves!"

"It," meant that stretch of rugged bricks and rubbish, with a surface of mud just thick enough to splash, which the Government then in office had provided for its taxpayers on horseback, and seemed in so far a solitude when Nelly spoke that its only other occupants were a fat man on a cob and a doubtful-looking lady riding a lame horse.

"It's very nice," answered John Roy, rather preoccupied, for just then a figure turned into the Ride on a hunting-looking chestnut, at a pace that promised soon to bring him alongside our pedestrians. The easy seat and general outline were not to be mistaken. Roy wished at the moment he had some other lady on his arm.

The chestnut, though going fast, must have been well in hand, it was pulled up so quickly at the rails, while a familiar voice exclaimed, "Holloa, Roy! In town at this time of year! Come and dine to-day. I'm off to-morrow morning for Newmarket." Then, as if catching sight of Nelly for the first time, the speaker bowed to his stirrup-iron, and added, "I *beg* your pardon. I was so glad to see my friend!"

It stung Roy to feel there should be an absolute necessity for introducing her on the spot as "Miss Burton—a lady who is going to do me the honour of becoming my wife." It stung him still more to notice an instantaneous change of manner, that only a sensitive nature would have detected, while,

with a second bow, not quite so low, yet somehow more respectful, the other observed, "Then it's no use hoping for you at dinner. Allow me to congratulate you both!" and cantered off.

"What a pretty fellow!" said Nelly in a tone of undisguised admiration.

"Most women agree with you," answered Roy, wondering he was not more nettled. "They used to call him the lady-killer in his regiment."

Her grey eyes opened wide.

"Did he really kill a lady? How horrible! He ought never to be saddled again!"

John Roy laughed. "You mean the horse, dear," said he. "I thought it was the man."

"Oh! I never looked at the gentleman," answered Nelly. "Who is he? What's his name?"

"Lord Fitzowen—commonly called Fitz!"

"A lord, is he? Well, he don't look half so like a lord as you! What is he going to Newmarket for?"

John Roy did not answer, He was thinking it would be rather uphill work to teach his wife all the ins-and-outs, the little technicalities, the very language of that artificial world into which he was bringing her. They would live in the country, he determined, and come but little to London for the present. A man might be very happy in the country with some hunting, shooting, farming, and such a beautiful creature to keep his house. One couldn't have everything. It was a great piece of good fortune that he didn't marry Lady Jane!

And Nelly, clinging to his arm, wondered how she could ever have lived without him. His presence was paradise, his absence a blank. All

places were alike if she only had *him* by her side.

"So they were married in due course of time —exactly one month from the day that he proposed to her on Beachmouth Pier. The wedding was quiet enough. Non bishop, no bridesmaids, and a cake of small dimesions from the confectioner's round the corner. The happy couple walked quietly out of the hotel to a neighbouring church. Nelly was given away by her nearest male relation, a retired drysalter residing at Clapham, who felt and looked in a false position throughout. Mrs. Phipps wept plentifully in the rector's pew (absent with his family in Switzerland), and the ceremony was performed by an ecclesiastic somewhat irreverently mentioned as "a clergyman on a job." One very old shoe was thrown by the upper housemaid when the happy couple left the hotel in a cab, and the waiter remained drunk all day. These were the only festivities. The servants agreed that though Miss Burton had done well for herself, the bridegroom looked old enough to be her father, and the wedding was a tame affair!

Nevertheless it was over, and they were married as irrevocably and completely as if a primate had officiated and the whole House of Lords had signed the register.

Nelly was supremely happy; so, in a calmer degree, was her husband. Both had obtained that to which most people look forward as the crowning joy of life, yet it seemed like a dream to read in next day's *Times* the simple and unpretending notice—

"Yesterday, at St. Withold's, by the Rev. Joseph Makeshift, JOHN ROY, Esq., of Royston Grange and 907 Piccadilly, to ELINOR, sole surviving daughter of Jacob Burton, Esq., late of High Holborn, London."

"John Roy!" said one or two friends, gleaning the morning papers with cigars in their mouths. "I have often wondered what had become of him. Used to be rather a good fellow. Only surviving child, too; looks as if he had picked up an heiress. Great absurdity marrying after forty, and infernal mistake to get caught before!"

But Nelly's history only began in reality on the day when she felt she was the happiest woman in the world because she stood at the altar as Roy's wife.

CHAPTER VII

WARDEN TOWERS

"AND you know her, Lord Fitzowen? What an odd person you are! I believe you know everybody in the world."

"I thought you said she was *out* of the world, Miss Bruce. Therefore you were surprised I should have made her acquaintance."

"That's not the question. Where *can* you have met her?"

"Nothing more simple; walking in the Park with her husband."

"Before they were married?"

"Of course. People don't walk together in the Park after they're married unless they've had a row."

"And he introduced you?"

"Why shouldn't he? Won't you introduce me to *your* husband, Miss Bruce, when the time comes and the man?"

She smiled rather wistfully. "Perhaps you know him already," said she. "And if you don't, I am not sure you are a desirable acquaintance. You might lead him into mischief."

"Somebody has been maligning me, and to *you* of all people, in whose good opinion I want so much to stand high. An enemy has done this."

"Not Mrs. Roy, at anyrate. She couldn't

remember having seen you. I said you were here, and asked her. There, Lord Fitz! There's a come-down!"

"Not a bit. Say a see-saw, if you please; for it's a go-up at the other end. If *she* had forgotten me, *you* hadn't!"

"How *can* I forget you when you're staying in the house? Besides, don't flatter yourself that I ever try!"

"Then I'll wait for a more favourable opportunity, and we'll talk about something else. What did you think of your new neighbour?"

"What did *you*?"

"I thought her—charming!"

"How like a man! As if that conveyed anything. Now I will do you justice, Lord Fitz. I believe you pretend to be stupider than you are, so I wonder you didn't find out something."

"What was there to find out? I could see with my own eyes she hadn't a wooden leg."

"Indeed! Well, you'll say I am ill-natured, and that one woman always tries to disparage another; did it not strike you she is hardly quite a lady? I don't mean to say she drops her h's, but something very like it. She has never lived amongst the people you and I are accustomed to meet, and I think Mr. Roy feels it. He looked very black at her more than once."

"What a shame! They haven't been married six weeks. If I had a wife now—never mind—I'm not going to commit myself, Miss Bruce. I might say too much."

"If you *had* a wife of course you would be just as trying as other husbands, but that's no business of mine. I was going to tell you—when we called, papa and I, as we were bound to do at once, being

such near neighbours, we found them at home, and I know she was got-up to receive visitors. In fact, she told me so. She called it 'seeing company.' She was well dressed, I must say, not *too* well, and as handsome as a picture. You seldom see such eyes and hair. But for all that there's a something. I'm convinced she is not what I call *thoroughbred*, and yet papa wouldn't allow it. He was completely fascinated, and you know how particular he is."

"Naturally. If I were *your* papa I should be very particular indeed."

"Nonsense. Don't interrupt. I watched Mr. Roy, and I'm sure he wasn't at his ease. He looked in a fidget every time she opened her mouth. I was sorry for him, and we didn't stay long, though she pressed me to *take* luncheon, and to *take* tea, and hoped I wouldn't *take* cold in the open carriage, and all the rest of it, as kindly as possible."

"And have you taken cold—I beg your pardon —*caught* cold? for, if so, you had better not stand here any longer. I shouldn't like your death to lie at my door."

"You haven't got a door, only a latch-key. But for once you talk sense. So draw my skates a little tighter, and we'll practise the Dutchman's Roll round the island and back again. Are you ready? Go!"

During the performance of this exhibition, which is but a succession of outside edges, neither very speedy nor very graceful, I may take the opportunity of explaining how these young people came to be disporting themselves on some five acres of ice, which milder weather would dissolve into a pretty little lake, forming a principal ornament in the grounds of Warden Towers.

Sir Hector and Miss Bruce, a widower and an

only daughter, had come to reside here, as their neighbours hoped, for a permanence, having taken a long lease of the place, which, notwithstanding its somewhat feudal name, had been hitherto the home of a retired tradesman, whose asthma compelled him to fight for breath in a warmer climate elsewhere. The house, though built with a turret at each end, was handsome and comfortable, the park roomy enough for a gallop, but not so extensive as to admit of feeding deer, and the gardens were exceedingly well laid out. As Sir Hector observed, "It was a nice gentlemanlike place in which to drivel away the rest of one's life. If Hester liked it, he would never ask to sleep out of the chintz room in the east tower again."

Hester liked whatever suited papa—that is to say, she turned him round her white fingers as an only daughter does turn the father who has learned to believe her a prodigy of infancy, a paragon of girlhood, and in all respects a pearl among womanhood. Sir Hector, though his Christian and surnames sounded so warlike, was a mild old gentleman of rather convivial habits and an easy temper, even when tortured by gout. He accepted its pains and penalties with a good-humour that roused the admiration of his friends; and the moment he resumed the use of his hands, or could put his lame feet to the ground, returned to those indulgences that sustained and strengthened his enemy with a zest only sharper for remembrance of past discipline and prospect of future pain.

To be sure, as he used to declare, "It was a pleasure to be ill when one could have Hester for a nurse"; and it is but justice to say that no temptation could lure this young lady from her post if papa was either threatened or laid up. Many a time she

stripped off riding-habit or ball-dress and sent the carriage back from the very door at the first of those symptoms that her experience told her were forerunners of an attack. Many an hour did she pass in darkened rooms, measuring draughts, smoothing pillows, reading to him, talking to him, soothing the sufferer with her presence and the touch of her hand, while other girls were sunning themselves in the looks of their admirers at archery-meeting and picnic, or, more delightful still, enjoying a stirring gallop under soft November skies, over lush November pastures, after the hounds!

For in such amusements and pastimes did Miss Bruce take more than a masculine delight. Lithe, straight, and agile, she was a proficient in all those bodily exercises at which ladies are now able to compete on equal terms with the stronger sex. A practised whip, she drove her ponies to an inch; a capital horsewoman, she rode to hounds (with a good pilot) in the first flight. She danced like a fairy; could run a quarter of a mile or walk half a dozen without the slightest inconvenience; and even professed, though of this she afforded no actual proof, that she was able to jump a gate or a stile. At anyrate, for all her softness of manner and grace of bearing, she seemed tough as whalebone and nimble as a wild deer.

In these days of high-pressure education she could not but be full of accomplishments, playing scientific music at sight, singing a second, speaking three or four languages idiomatically, ungrammatically, and with a fair accent. She knew how to work embroidery, knit shooting-hose, and send people in to dinner according to their rank without fear of a mistake. On the other hand, she was but a moderate historian, sacred or profane, believed

our version of the Bible a direct translation from the Hebrew, remembered the Wars of the Roses only because of their pretty name, and suffered hopeless confusion about the Ligue and the Fronde. She could *not* read Shakespeare, she honestly confessed, nor understand Tennyson; had tried to wade through *Corinne*, and found it *stupid*; believed she would have liked Sir Walter but for the Scotch dialect, and thought in her heart *Vanity Fair* and the *Loves of the Angels* the two finest works in the language. Of household affairs she had some vague glimmerings, the result of experience in ordering dinner, and even believed, because she never tried, that she could do her own marketing. Every Christmas she spent a cheque from papa in soup and blankets, which she gave away with a great deal of method and very little judgment. To sum up all, she was a staunch Protestant, a regular church-goer, and skated to admiration.

Her cavalier, also, performed handsomely over ice or asphalte, on skates or rollers. Both were members of Prince's Club; nor does it necessarily follow, as nameless slanderers would have us believe, that they were therefore utterly lost to all considerations of honourable feeling and even outward decency. It is difficult to understand why a pastime that brings young people together in a glare of light under the eyes of countless spectators should have been held up to obloquy as a recognised means of the vilest intrigue; or why a healthy exercise, exacting close attention under considerable effort, should be supposed to cloak overtures and advances that might be made far less conspicuously in the crash of a concert or the confusion of a ballroom.

It seems to me that the black sheep of both

sexes must be at a disadvantage when the slightest inclination to either side from a just and equal balance cannot but result in physical downfall. The admirer deposited on his seat rather than his knees may scarcely hope to excite sympathy in his idol, and the idol herself must be well aware that she can never mount her pedestal again if she comes down from it with a sprawl! That Miss Bruce was as wicked a young lady as she was a good skater I emphatically deny. For her companion's virtues I will not take upon me to answer with the same certainty.

Lord Fitzowen, as Mr. Roy said, "commonly called Fitz," had been about the world for more years than people thought, or, indeed, than he wished them to think.

He was one of those men, happily not very numerous in his order, who, after the first blush of youth, seem to have no object in the world but to amuse themselves. For this levity of disposition, and indifference to the real purposes of life, he was perhaps indebted to the joyous temperament that accompanies perfect bodily health. A famous writer of our own day has expressed the startling opinion that if people never found their livers out of order, no great works would be accomplished. This is perhaps another way of saying that discontent is the origin of progress.

As Fitz, from the time he pounded strawberry messes at Eton till he mixed Hussar-broth (a compound of which the *substratum* used to be red-herrings fried in gin) for his brother-subalterns at Hounslow, never knew he *had* a liver, and hated, besides, every kind of mental exertion, we may presume that nature did not intend him for one of

those "weary brothers" who either imprint or appreciate "footprints on the sands of time." What he did—rather, what he did *not* do, if we may be allowed such a contradiction in terms—seemed done remarkably well. He was the best idler in society, and this is saying a good deal in London life, where the art is cultivated with a diligence that cannot but ensure success.

Having a title, though an Irish one, a sufficient income, an agreeable person, imperturbable good-humour, and spirits, as he said himself, "forty above proof," it is no wonder that Lord Fitzowen was welcome everywhere, and an especial favourite amongst women.

Nevertheless, with an intuitive perception of the fitness of things denied to the duller sex, they never expected him to marry. "He's delightful, I know, dear," Miss Bruce observed on one occasion in the confidence of five-o'clock tea, "but as for anything serious, I should as soon expect a proposal from the beadle at St. George's. It's entirely out of Fitz's line!" So he made love to them all round without burning his fingers, and persuaded himself that, with many faults, he was yet a man of strong feelings and sincere affections.

Somehow Fitz always seemed to belong to the prettiest woman present. Although there were other guests at Warden Towers, it was characteristic that he alone should be gazing at a winter sunset with his host's handsome daughter after completing the Dutchman's Roll to the unbounded satisfaction of both.

"It is time to go in," said Hester, rosy and breathless, looking intently at the red streaks fading into a frosty film behind the island. "How

I love this cold, clear weather! I wish it would last all the year through."

"You ought to have been an Arctic explorer," laughed Fitz.

Miss Bruce made no answer, but her eye deepened and the smile faded from her face.

CHAPTER VIII

ROYSTON GRANGE

THE cold, clear weather soon began to change. The sun went down red and frosty, but Fitz, looking out of his bedroom window at midnight, observed a halo round the moon, which he described as "her wig," and by breakfast-time a thaw was proclaimed. Spouts trickled, eaves dripped, birds chirped in the laurels, the distant downs melted into grey, and a soft wind blew gently through the fir plantations on the south of Warden Towers.

In such a country-house as that over which Miss Bruce presided, the change to "hunting weather" was greeted with a hearty welcome, but at a few miles' distance it produced no little anxiety and discomfiture. The Roys were about to give a dinner-party, the first since they came to live at Royston Grange. They had consulted the almanac, made, as Nelly said, "a proper arrangement with the moon," and now, if her light should be obscured by clouds, if the roads were axle-deep in soft white mud, if the floods were out, if the rain came down, if everything conspired to baffle their guests and spoil their party, husband and wife agreed "it would be really too provoking."

They were together in the breakfast-room of Nelly's new home. She locked the tea-caddy, and

fitted its key on a steel ring among many others, with a certain housewifely care that seemed her second nature; he paced up and down between window and fireplace with an impatience that bordered on disgust.

"If the frost had only lasted over this confounded dinner-party," said he, "it might have rained torrents to-morrow, and welcome! I want to get some hunting next week. Now I wish we hadn't asked the Grantons. She's delicate—*very*. They'll send an excuse and not come—or they'll come and not go away. If she catches a bad cold, she'll very likely die in the house!"

"Oh, Mr. Roy!" exclaimed Nelly (she could not yet bring herself to call her paragon by so simple a name as John). "She can have the pink room, poor dear! It is the warmest in the house. And I'm sure I'll nurse her night and day."

"Nonsense, Nelly!" was the marital rejoinder. "I wish I could teach you not to take everything one says *au pied de la lettre*."

"That's French," she answered good-humouredly; "but even in French it saves trouble to say what you mean."

"What I mean is this. If the Grantons throw us over, you must send all your people in differently. Are you quite sure you won't make a mess of the whole thing?"

She pulled a list from her apron pocket, written in her own clear, firm hand, and looked wistfully over its contents.

"I dread that part most of all," she whispered, with a loving look at him from her deep grey eyes. "The dinner I can superintend well enough, and arranging the furniture and lighting the company rooms. It's what I'm used to. But I *am* afraid of

the county gentry ; and if once I begin wrong, and march them off out of their proper places, I know I shall get as red as a turkey-cock, and think everybody is looking at me. You see, I never had to do with great folks, dear, till I knew you."

He bit his lip. How could he be angry with this kind and handsome woman, who loved him so well? Yet it *was* provoking to be obliged to drill her for these little exigencies of every-day life, it *was* tiresome to be always in hot water lest she should say or do something contrary to that unwritten code which it is so impossible to classify or define. Lady Jane would have given him no anxiety on this score. And yet he could not bring himself to wish he had married Lady Jane!

"Remember, dear," he continued kindly enough, "I take Mrs. Granton, because she is a Viscount's daughter, and Fitzowen takes you."

"Not Sir Hector Bruce?" said Nelly. "He's a much older man. I was always taught to reverence grey hairs. I wish you had more of them."

"Certainly *not*," he insisted. "Sir Hector is a baronet, and of early creation ; but Fitzowen is an Irish peer"—

"What's an Irish peer?" asked Mrs. Roy. "I shall never take it all in. I thought one lord was as good as another lord, and I still think a baronet of sixty ought to be of more account than a young whipper-snapper not six-and-twenty. But you know best, of course."

"I suppose I do," he answered drily, and deferred for the present his intention of piloting his wife through the intricacies of Debrett.

"But while he smoked a cigar in the stable, and consulted his groom on such inexhaustible

topics as the grey's fetlock and the chestnut's cough, he felt that Nelly's ignorance of conventionalities would be a continual source of irritation to his shy and sensitive nature; that notwithstanding her beauty, her sweet temper, her entire devotion to himself, a woman might have suited him better who was more conversant with his own artificial state of society, that he might even have been wiser not to have married at all. It is but justice to add that he had the grace to be ashamed of such reflections, and dismissed them with a jerk, just as he threw away the stump of his cigar.

Half an hour later, while bent on her household avocations, he saw her pause as she passed through the conservatory to tie up a pretty little nosegay prepared for his own buttonhole when he should go out. Something of the old thrill he felt on the pier at Beachmouth stirred his heart once more. Her attitudes were so graceful, the curves of her figure so true to the line of beauty, her eyes so deep and soft, her features so exquisitely cut, her locks so dark and glossy, he could not but admit that his wife, in appearance at least, was the most bewitching woman he had ever seen.

"As far as looks go," thought John Roy, "she will hold her own with the best, and I can trust her to be nicely dressed. While dinner lasts it will do well enough, but I know what women are. They'll find her out in the drawing-room, and they'll let her see they've found her out. Nelly will lose her head, and say or do something that will make me feel hot all over. I wish she hadn't asked them! I wish the cook would get drunk, or the kitchen chimney catch fire, or something frightful would happen to get one out of the whole d——d thing!"

But the cook and the kitchen chimney remained staunch to their respective duties. Delicate Mrs. Granton did not send an excuse; on the contrary, she was one of the first arrivals, in a remarkably low dress. Sir Hector, Miss Bruce, and Lord Fitzowen turned up in due course. By eight o'clock the whole party were assembled in the drawing-room. Nelly received them in turn, with exactly the right amount of cordiality, neither too cold nor too gushing, paired them off, and sent them to dinner, with a sinking heart indeed, but a perfect imitation of high-bred composure, followed them on Lord Fitzowen's arm with gracious dignity, and Mr. Roy began to breathe freely again.

"After all," he thought, "D'Orsay was right. A good heart is good manners ready made. Nelly couldn't have done it better if she had been born a duke's daughter!"

Soup and fish came and went with the usual soup and fish conversation. Mrs. Granton asked her host how the new stoves answered in his hot-houses, and whether he should take Mrs. Roy to the hunt ball? The rest told each other that "it was *really* a thaw, that the frost had been enjoyable enough for skaters, that the change was welcome to those who hunt, and—and—champagne, if you please," after which the talk became more general and more discursive, not without a few agreeable personalities and remarks occasionally much to the point. The whole affair seemed to go off smoothly, and, though the company was chiefly composed of country neighbours, the entertainment promised to be a success.

People were well paired, and this was the more fortunate as our table of precedence regulating English society leaves nothing to chance. Mrs.

Granton, a pleasant little woman, with a tendency to mild flirtation, liked both her host and her neighbour on the other side, a young Guardsman, with good spirits, good appetite, and good looks. Two squires, fast friends of thirty years' standing, whose talk was of shorthorns, sat together. The venerable clergyman of the parish placed himself next Miss Bruce, a young lady for whom he professed the deepest regard, to which she warmly responded, consulting him on his many charities, and speaking of him in all societies as "a dear old thing!" An unmarried damsel of a certain age, not yet on the retired list, was mated with a veteran admiral, who made up for his weather-worn face and grizzled hair by that frank and kindly gallantry which women find so irresistible, and which, combined with hardy habits and a reputation for personal daring, renders officers of the Royal Navy such universal favourites with the sex. Sir Hector, who sat on the same side of the table as his daughter, sheltered therefore from the warning glances with which she was accustomed to check such imprudences, launched out freely in the matter of savours and sauces, did not refuse champagne, and even asked for a glass of old ale after cheese, though, as Hester observed, "Papa knew it was poison to him. Absolutely poison!" Finally, Lord Fitzowen, who took in his hostess, found himself completely fascinated and enthralled. Her beauty, her good-humour, above all, her simple manners, charmed him exceedingly. They were so wholly different from the artificial graces he was accustomed to in general society.

Fitz, though a gentleman, had, I fear, promised himself more mirth than interest in studying the character of John Roy's new wife. He expected

her to furnish amusement during the evening, food for laughter with Hester on the morrow, and was surprised to find how completely he had been mistaken.

Quiet and unobtrusive, she seemed yet to take her own place as mistress of the house with a serene and conscious dignity. While paying courteous attention to her guests, no movement of the servants escaped her vigilance. Those deep grey eyes seemed to observe the requirements of all, and the training of her early life, the habit of close attention to trifles, of looking into everything herself, now stood her in good stead.

Nelly was at high pressure, nevertheless. She had no fear, indeed, of the cook's failures, nor of shortcomings on the part of her well-paid and well-ordered establishment, but she sadly mistrusted herself.

She had already learned to stand in awe of her husband's fastidious taste; she dreaded at every moment to offend it by something she might say or do, and she glanced at him from time to time with an obvious timidity that was not lost on her sharp-sighted neighbour. "Does he bully her?" thought Fitz. "She seems afraid of him. She's not quite at her ease. Good Heavens! If I had such a wife as that I should worship the very ground beneath her feet!"

Like many of his class, our friend was an enthusiast, and at least *believed* himself capable of romance and self-sacrifice. Some of the greatest follies on behalf of women have been perpetrated by men of the world, at whom that world invariably expresses a well-bred surprise, wondering they should "not have known better," ignoring the recklessness that stands for generosity, and forgetting

how its own treadmill becomes at last so wearisome that any change is accepted for an improvement.

It is a sad reflection, but, as the practised angler well knows, to capture fishes of all kinds there is nothing like a change of bait. So for the human gudgeon novelty has a keen and dangerous attraction. A bit of sweet-briar in the cottager's hedge never seems so fragrant as after a walk through the duke's conservatories. His Grace himself, when he can get away from his French cook, loves to dine on a simple mutton-chop, and I have always been satisfied that queens and princesses wore the willow for King Cophetua when he placed his crown at the feet of a beggar-maid.

Lord Fitzowen had necessarily been thrown into the society of ladies of high rank—had been refused by the great heiress of one season, smiled on by the great beauty of the next, been a little in love, like everybody else, with the handsomest of duchesses, and had neither lost flesh nor spirits nor appetite from the strength of his attachments. But here was a new experience altogether. Apart from her good looks, he had never met any other woman the least like Mrs. Roy, and he studied her with the feeling of admiration and curiosity that a man experiences who, after a night's sleep on a railway, wakes in the streets of a foreign capital that he has never seen before.

The interest, I must admit, was all on one side. Nelly seemed much too preoccupied to think of anything but her female guests—how she was to get them into the drawing-room, what to do with them when there, whether tea and coffee should be served separately or together, once or twice each, and if she ought or ought not to press everybody to stay a little longer after the welcome moment when

their carriages were proclaimed to be waiting at the door?

Fitz could see that his attentions left no impression, and this indifference only made him the more desirous of standing well in her good opinion.

"I have been presented to you before to-day, Mrs. Roy," said he, stimulated to exertion by a glass of Chartreuse after ice. "You have forgotten *me*, but I have not forgotten *you*."

"Indeed!" answered Nelly. "It's very stupid of me; I hope you'll excuse it. I was never good at remembering faces."

"You were walking with Roy in the Park. It must have been just before you were married. I was riding, and he introduced me. Do you remember *now*?"

"I remember your horse; such a beautiful chestnut. I was always fond of animals. Have you brought it with you to Warden Towers?"

A little piqued, and feeling rather at a disadvantage, Fitz pulled himself together before answering.

"He is in a stable at the village. I rather agree with you, Mrs. Roy; I like beasts on four feet better than on two. May I bring him over some day to renew his acquaintance?"

"Thank you," said Nelly absently. He suspected she had not paid attention to a word. Her faculties were now concentrated on the responsibility of "making the move" to marshal her ladies into the drawing-room. After all she signalled the wrong one, and, observing a cloud on her husband's brows as she passed out, followed the rustling squadron in their retreat with heightened colour and rather a heavy heart.

Lord Fitzowen, though he filled a bumper of

Mr. Roy's excellent claret, leaned back in his chair less talkative than usual. His evening's entertainment had not turned out as he expected, and he found himself thinking a good deal more of his friend's wife than his friend's wine.

CHAPTER IX

STRANGERS YET

WHEN they had talked enough about poor's-rates, shorthorns, the scarcity of foxes, and unpopularity of their Lord-Lieutenant, John Roy sent his brown sherry round for the last time, and suggested coffee in the drawing-room. Entering behind his guests, he stole an eager glance at Nelly, to see how she was getting on.

Yes—it was just as he feared. He had told her particularly to cultivate Mrs. Granton, and there was Mrs. Granton on a sofa with Miss Bruce, at the far end of the room. The two other ladies of consideration were in close conference over the fire, and his wife sat at a distant table, showing photographs to the mature spinster, who looked more than half asleep.

Roy's anxious, jealous temperament was up in arms on the instant. D——n it! Nelly," he whispered, over her shoulder, "don't let them send you to Coventry in your own house!" His glance was unkind, and even angry; she had never before heard him swear. With a chill, sick feeling at her

heart she realised, for the first time, how wide a difference there is between marriage and love.

"How can he look at me like that?" thought Nelly, "and at Mrs. Granton as if he could fall down and worship her? If this is good society, I've had enough of it! I wish I had never seen Beachmouth. I wish I had never left auntie and the hotel. I wish—I wish I was dead and buried, and done with once for all, and he'd got another wife, a *real* lady born, who would suit him better, but could never love him half as well!"

If anybody had said a kind word to her she must have burst out crying, but the servants were moving about with tea and coffee, there was an adjournment to the card-tables, and by the time eight of the party had settled to whist and two to bézique, she recovered her equanimity, feeling only unreasonably tired and depressed.

Nelly disliked cards. Lord Fitzowen had "cut out" at the nearest whist table. I will not take upon me to say that he was disappointed when he found his hostess the only other unoccupied person in the room.

A pianoforte stood near the door into the conservatory, which was well lighted, and looked very pretty with its exotics, rock-work, and fountain in the midst. He asked her to play, and Nelly was too shy to refuse, but her courage failed when she sat down, so they opened music-books and talked about them instead.

John Roy, sorting a handful of trumps, turned round to see that his guests were amused. "If you like to smoke, Fitzowen," said he, "nobody minds it in the conservatory,—only shut the glass door. Take him, Nelly, and show him how."

Lord Fitzowen, thus invited, professed great

eagerness to see the conservatory, and was careful to close the door of communication with the drawing-room, though nothing would induce him to light a cigar in the presence of his hostess.

So they walked up and down inhaling the heavy perfume of hot-house flowers, reading their Latin names, and hanging over the gold-fish in their basin under the fountain. Finally, they seated themselves at the extreme end, and Mrs. Roy, who felt she ought to say something, observed, "It was very quiet and pleasant, after the heat in the other rooms. She often brought her work here, and sat listening to the fountain till she fancied she was miles and miles away."

Fitzowen glanced sharply in her face. No, she was not speaking for effect, and seemed simply to state a fact that led to nothing more. She looked as if she was thinking, deeply too, but of what—of whom? She baffled him, she puzzled him. This was the most interesting woman he had ever met in his life!

He had penetration enough to see that she was shy and ill at ease. Diffident people have usually a keen sense of the ludicrous. If he could make her laugh, she would feel more at home with him, and he might hope to obtain her goodwill and friendship—perhaps, in time, her confidence and regard.

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Roy," said he. "I have the same sensations myself; all this wealth of green vegetables seems to raise me into another phase of existence. I feel like a caterpillar, for instance, in a cabbage-leaf, or a sweep on May-day."

"I don't know about the caterpillar," she answered, with rather a sad smile; "but I daresay the sweeps are very happy on May-day. I often think that you great people, who do nothing

but amuse yourselves, are not half so contented as those who work for their bread."

"Every man to his trade, Mrs. Roy. I couldn't earn a shilling a day at any employment you can name. I was brought up to amuse myself."

"And I to work. Yes, you may laugh; but I was taught from a child to gain an honest livelihood. I'm not ashamed of it. I wouldn't change places with one of those ladies in the next room. Only, I sometimes wish Mr. Roy had been a poor man. He would have felt how hard I tried to make him comfortable."

"He does *not* feel it now," thought Lord Fitzowen—"and this is another of the many wives who consider themselves unappreciated and misunderstood"; but he was too discreet to put his sentiments into words, and only answered by a look of sympathy and expectation.

She remained silent for a minute, then broke off a sprig of geranium, and continued, more to herself than to her companion—

"I wonder if people get on better for being exactly alike in character, or in all respects different. I often puzzle over it for hours when I'm sitting here listening to the drip of the fountain, and watching the gold-fish. I daresay they're sometimes unhappy too, poor things!"

"Fish are *always* discontented," he answered gravely,—"but, with regard to the previous question, I am convinced that husbands and wives ought to be as different as—as—chalk from cheese. The man is the chalk, of course, and the woman the cheese."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," replied Mrs. Roy. "Only, perhaps you are not the best judge, being a bachelor."

"How do you know I'm a bachelor?"

She blushed in some trepidation, lest she should have stumbled into another solecism.

"I beg your pardon," she faltered. "I—I was not aware—I had not heard of your being married. I hope I have said nothing wrong."

He laughed merrily. "Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Roy. I am still a beast untamed, a gentleman at large, a virgin page, whatever you choose to call it. When my time *does* come, I hope the lady will be most unlike myself."

"I daresay she will be very nice," observed Nelly simply. "But, whatever you do, Lord Fitzowen, don't marry a woman below your rank in life; partly for your own sake, but a great deal more for hers."

His tone was much graver, and he looked in the face of his hostess with an expression of sincere respect and regard, while he answered—

"Pardon me, Mrs. Roy. There I cannot agree with you. A man is seldom fortunate enough to marry his ideal, but, at least, he should try. Shall I tell you mine? A woman of character, a woman of energy—not afraid to take her part in the business of life, nor ashamed to acknowledge it; despising only what is base, and hating only what is wrong. The less she knows of that artificial game we call society, with its unworthy interests and petty artifices, the better. Frank, natural, and simple, I should like her all the more for utter ignorance of the great world, and a complete indifference to its ways. Now I've told you my notion of a wife, Mrs. Roy. Of course she must be handsome, and have black hair, like yours—but that has nothing to do with it."

Her heart beat faster. He had described a

character the very counterpart of her own, and he was an acknowledged judge of human nature, a thorough man of the world, occupying even a higher position than her own husband. Perhaps she had deceived herself, after all, and magnified molehills into mountains, from sheer anxiety lest she should fall short of the standard required by that paragon. She looked in Fitzowen's frank, handsome face, and felt that here was a friend in whom she could confide, a counsellor on whom she could rely. Versed in worldly ways, but untainted by worldly duplicity; wise, good-natured, and experienced, he would point out the path to follow, the difficulties to be avoided; in a word, would teach her to retain her hold on the affections of Mr. Roy.

She pulled to pieces the bit of geranium in her hand, as if absorbed in that occupation, but stole an anxious look at him from under her long eyelashes the while.

"You—you are an old friend of my husband's, are you not?" she asked in a low, uncertain voice.

He had a scale of friendship, regulated on a tariff of his own. "I would lend him a fiver," he thought, "if he wanted it; perhaps a pony. Certainly not a monkey." But though there is a wide margin between twenty-five pounds and five hundred, he felt justified in answering, "Yes, a very old friend," bravely enough.

"Lord Fitzowen," she continued, "if I tell you something in confidence, will you promise not to repeat it to a soul?"

"Honour among thieves, Mrs. Roy. You and I are not thieves, and you may trust me as you would your solicitor."

"I would rather trust you as my husband's friend, and I will. You know, or perhaps you do

not know, that till we married I never lived among the sort of people I meet now every day. I was respectably brought up and well educated, Lord Fitzowen, but my father was a tradesman and my mother a governess. I am not ashamed of them, far from it, only in such a station it was not to be expected, of course, that I could acquire the manners and habits of the class I have to mix with now. I try to learn day by day, but it is such uphill work, and I have nobody to teach me!"

"They had much better learn of *you*. I beg pardon for interrupting."

"If I ask Mr. Roy, he is vexed, and I cannot bear to see him cross. He seems to expect one to know things by instinct. I am dreadfully put about by little difficulties that you would think the merest trifles. But they are no trifles to *me*! It's like not knowing how to spell a word when you write a letter, and having no dictionary."

"Shall I be your dictionary?"

"Will you? It's what I wanted to ask, only I didn't quite know how. It would be a great relief, for sometimes, I do assure you, I feel at my wits' end. Now I will consult *you*, if you don't mind."

"Mind! I would do anything in the world for you—and for him."

"Thank you, Lord Fitzowen. Don't think me ungrateful because I say little about it. I feel your kindness deeply all the same. Now we'll go back to the drawing-room. The whist-players will be wondering what can have kept us so long."

"One moment, Mrs. Roy. Have you any reason to believe there's a ghost somewhere loose about the garden?"

"A ghost! Good gracious! Why?"

"Simply, that for the last ten minutes I have

"A Ghost! good gracious!"

seen a pale, unearthly face pressed against the glass, glaring at us from outside. Square, flat, hard-featured, and not a pretty face by any means."

Nelly's spirits were rising. "Square, flat, hard-featured," she repeated, with a laugh, "and not a pretty face by any means. Oh! then I shouldn't wonder if it was Mrs. Mopus!"

CHAPTER X

MRS. MOPUS

"WHO is Mrs. Mopus?" but there came no answer to his question, for already the rubbers had been lost and won; the carriages were announced A table was set out with brandy, seltzer, ice, lemons, and cold water, the modern substitute for stirrup-cups of former days; and Lord Fitzowen's hostess was too much engrossed with the ceremonies of leave-taking to spare him any further attention. Nevertheless, when it came to his turn to wish her good-night, she gave him her hand with such marked cordiality as to excite the observation even of Mr. Roy.

"How do you like our friend Fitz, Nelly?" asked her husband, yawning his way upstairs. "You had every opportunity to-night of forming an opinion."

"I think him very nice," answered Nelly, with a bright smile.

"Most women do," he replied drily, and shut his door.

Almost at the same moment, in the obscurity of a closed landau, Miss Bruce asked Lord Fitzowen the same question about Mrs. Roy. Fitz did not respond quite so frankly.

"Wants knowing, I should say," was his verdict. "Very quiet, very reserved. A character like my

own, I think. Born to blush unseen; and bloom brightest in the shade."

"You ought to blush unseen in that corner," laughed Hester, "for being such a humbug! If you're both so shy and reserved, Lord Fitz, perhaps you will tell me what you found to talk about for a good hour in the conservatory?"

But Lord Fitz made no answer. He was still ruminating on the last question he asked his hostess, "Who is Mrs. Mopus?"

Mrs. Mopus was neither more nor less than the housekeeper at Royston Grange, and in that capacity regarded John Roy's new wife with no small amount of jealousy and ill-will. So long as her master remained a bachelor, visiting his home at long intervals, to bring with him a houseful of bachelors like himself, with their valets, she found the selection exceedingly to her taste. In his absence she was an independent sovereign; when he came back, a lady patroness, presiding over an agreeable little circle of gentlemen's gentlemen, with whom her word was law, particularly at supper-time.

She had great opportunities for peculation, of which she availed herself moderately, but with scrupulous regularity; could engage or discharge housemaids, laundry-maids, and kitchen-maids at will; won a series of triumphs over the successive cooks who came and went like the slides of a magic-lantern; and after a protracted contest with the Scotch gardener, found herself unquestioned mistress of Royston Grange.

She was a widow, with one good-for-nothing son, alive or dead in Australia, of whom she possessed no other memento than an ill-looking photograph. Energetic, resolute, and persevering,

had she been ten years younger, she would surely have tried to marry Mr. Roy: but the looking-glass told her such a scheme was hopeless, and she gave it up almost as soon as it crossed her mind.

When she learned he was going to take a wife, she respectfully tendered her resignation, knowing well it would not be accepted. John Roy (so like a man!) hating all trouble of a domestic nature, begged her, of course, to remain, and for a time she speculated on the chance of his bride being a young, inexperienced woman, whom with her cunning and audacity she might turn round her finger like the rest of the household. It was a serious blow to discover that the new Mrs. Roy seemed as practised an adept in the science of housekeeping as herself, knowing the due consumption of butcher's meat to a pound, of coals and sugar to a lump, that she would no more submit to stealthy pilfering than to open robbery, and was resolved, in accordance with one of the first instincts of womanhood, to be mistress in her own house.

Mrs. Mopus did not yield without a struggle, but in the very first trial of strength found herself so ignobly defeated, less by Nelly's quiet dignity of manner than her intimate knowledge of the subject in question (a supply of sandpaper and soap for the housemaid's closet), that she determined in future to avoid coming to conclusions with her new mistress, preferring rather to watch and wait till opportunity offered, and then do her the worst turn that lay in her power.

She had no little knowledge of the world and its ways. John Roy, who took her from a recommendation, and not a character, was quite

satisfied with her own account of how the intervening time—some seven or eight years—had been spent since she left her last situation. She professed to have been in business as a fancy stationer, and to have failed — of course through the rascality of an agent; but the valet of one of Mr. Roy's shooting friends could have told him a different story. She had been keeping a small public-house of no good repute near Croydon, which this worthy frequented when attending certain suburban steeplechases, where he was in the habit of wagering freely with his late master's money. He prided himself, however, on being no less a man of honour than a man of the world, and gave her to understand, doubtless for some practical equivalent, that he had no intention of showing her up. Still, she felt that her position was insecure, her tenure uncertain—more so than ever since the arrival of Mrs. Roy, and she cherished for her new mistress that goodwill which animates the bosom of one woman for another who has thwarted, supplanted, and found her out.

After their supper in "the room," as it was called—an elaborate meal, of which every upper servant felt bound in honour to promote the hilarity and comfort—Mrs. Mopus had contracted a habit of walking out of doors for half an hour or so in all weathers and under all circumstances, protesting that she could not get to sleep without this taste of fresh air after the labours of the day. Her real reasons were, perhaps, not entirely sanitary. It might be convenient thus to withdraw for a stated portion of time daily from the observation of the household, and no questions asked. When first she established the practice she was narrowly watched, no doubt, by her fellow-servants, but in

the course of a few months, when nothing came of these nightly wanderings, they ceased to regard them, and Mrs. Mopus found herself free to steal about the gardens and shrubberies wherever she pleased, unnoticed in the dark.

It was thus she held private interviews with the butcher to accommodate certain serious differences concerning the heavy overcharges on which he tried to put her off with a shabby ten per cent., and it was thus, too, that she clandestinely met a neighbouring farmer, sixty years of age and given to inebriety, who made honourable proposals of marriage, broken off prematurely by his being sold up on quarter day.

When there was company at Royston Grange, it was her habit in these nightly prowlings to peer through its panes into the conservatory. It amused her to watch the young men who adjourned there for coffee and tobacco, moving about among the flowers, like tropical birds, in their gorgeous smoking-costumes. She was edified, too, by the freedom of their conversation, picking up occasional scraps of scandal concerning great people in London, or country neighbours nearer home, of which she would otherwise have remained ignorant. Collating their version of such affairs with that of their valets, she formed her own conclusions, and revolved them in her mind for future use. It was one of her maxims that the knowledge of a fellow-creature's secret (for evil) was as good as a banknote. The time was sure to come when either he would pay to keep it quiet, or somebody else to find it out.

But her observations had hitherto been confined to the male sex. It seemed a great piece of luck to detect, on this night of the dinner-party, a lady

sitting alone with a gentleman in the conservatory; a greater, to discover that lady was Mrs. Roy. Their conversation, indeed, might have been published in the first column of the *Times*; but there is no dialogue so innocent that it will not bear misconstruction, and the listening housekeeper overheard enough to lay the foundation of such a plot as she hoped would undermine the life's happiness of her mistress, estrange her from her husband, and drive her at last ignominiously from her home. If she had any scruples of pity, they were blown into air by Nelly's last remark while she entered the drawing-room—"Not a pretty face, by any means. Oh! then I shouldn't wonder if it was Mrs. Mopus!"

"And Mrs. Mopus will be even with you yet, before she's done!" muttered the housekeeper, as she crept back through the laurels, shaking with suppressed passion. What are *you*, my fine lady, I should like to know, for all your stylish looks and your black hair? Why, you're no better born than myself, and no better brought up! If you'd been a real lady, a lady of quality, you'd have kept your own place in the drawing-room, *like* a lady, and not come poking your nose into the linen-closets and the storeroom with me. Lady, indeed! If that young gentleman, and he *is* a gentleman, and a lord into the bargain, knew what I do, he wouldn't be so keen to follow up and down, like a dog at your heels. And Mr. Roy, too, I'd like to hear what he would say to such goings-on. He shall know them, too, that he shall, before he's twenty-four hours older. I've been a faithful servant to him and his for many a long year, and I'm not going to see him put upon now. Not a pretty face, and you wouldn't wonder if it was Mrs.

Mopus! Yes, it *is* Mrs. Mopus, and that you shall find out, my fine madam, to your cost!"

She was so angry that she went straight to her bedroom, and sat by the light of a single tallow-candle cogitating her plans far into the night.

Mrs. Roy meanwhile, unconscious of coming evil, congratulated herself on the success of her dinner-party, and her own observance of those formalities she had so dreaded for more than a week.

"I never made a single mistake, did I?" she asked next morning at breakfast, peeping triumphantly round the tea-urn at her husband.

"Not many," he answered. "You made the move after dinner to the rector's wife instead of Mrs. Granton, and you didn't half take notice of that tiresome old Lady Meadowbank."

Nelly's face fell. "I'm so sorry, dear," said she. "It's nice of you to want to be kind to her, poor woman, for she's a widow."

"Oh, it's not for that," he answered sharply. "You never seem to understand things, Nelly. She owns the best covert in the country."

Mrs. Roy looked rather sad, and held her tongue.

A few such conjugal amenities, a few lectures on the proprieties from Mr. Roy, followed by silent tears, the bitterer that she was heartily ashamed of them, and Nelly began to lose confidence in herself, to dread the very tingle of the door-bell that announced visitors, and to make more conventional mistakes than ever in sheer nervousness and anxiety lest she should do wrong.

If, as has been said, the great secret of oratory is to entertain a thorough contempt for one's audience, so the art of shining in society cannot be successfully cultivated under feelings of diffi-

dence, and mistrust of one's own position or one's own powers. Mrs. Roy would glance anxiously at her husband before she spoke, say the wrong thing when she *did* speak, or stop short in the middle of a sentence, as if conscious of her blunders, and waiting his instructions to go on—then he would shoot angry glances at her, which made matters worse; and once, after a certain luncheon to which some neighbours arrived unexpectedly, he reproached her for her awkwardness, her timidity, above all, her silence, and told her—positively told her—"he couldn't bear to see her sitting at the top of his table, mum like a fool!"

The last feather fairly broke the back of her self-respect. She began to long for sympathy, for help, instruction, and advice. If Lord Fitzowen would only come, she thought he might tell her what to do; he was so kind, so considerate, so ready to share with her his experience and knowledge of the world. That very afternoon Lord Fitzowen *did* come. She saw him ride past the windows while she was sitting disconsolately at tea, and ran to the glass before he was announced, to smooth her hair and make sure her eyes did not look as if she had been crying.

John Roy, marking trees for thinning, met his visitor in the park. "I'd come back with you," said he, wiping his bill-hook on the hedger's gloves he wore, "only I've got so wet amongst all this underwood. But go up to the house; you'll find Nelly at home. She'll be glad to see you; she's rather in the dumps; it will do her good." And he returned to that most engrossing of all occupations, chopping in one's own plantations, while Lord Fitzowen cantered over the grass to pass his visit of ceremony to Mrs. Roy.

CHAPTER XI

A WALKING DICTIONARY

SHE received him with a bright smile, that faded to a look of womanly concern when he gave her his left hand.

"Why, you've got your arm in a sling," said she. "What is it? Nothing serious, I hope. You've had a tumble from your horse."

John Roy would have told her she used the wrong expression. A good rider *falls with* his horse, a bad one *tumbles off*. Fitzowen answered carelessly. "It serves me right for hunting before the frost was quite gone. I've put my shoulder out. It's nothing to signify, and luckily I didn't hurt your friend the chestnut."

"If you had not hurt yourself it would be more to the purpose. Did you ride him here?"

"How could I, Mrs. Roy? He was out hunting yesterday. No. I came over on one of Miss Bruce's ponies."

She jumped to conclusions, like a very woman. Of course, she ought to have seen it long ago. How stupid she had been! Mr. Roy was quite right when he said she was not fit to find her way about in general society. Miss Bruce and this young nobleman were lovers, and in all probability engaged. She might confide in Lord Fitzowen now without the slightest reserve or afterthought.

It was fortunate—providential; and yet she could not help reflecting that Hester seemed unlike the sort of person he had described as his ideal of a wife.

"I see," she observed after a pause. "Of course you would."

"What do you see?" he asked; "and of course I would what?"

"Of course you will have some tea. Shall I make it for you? Not so well as Miss Bruce, but the best I can."

"I didn't come here to talk about Miss Bruce," said he, subsiding into a low chair while she handed him his tea. "I am more interested at this moment in Mrs. Roy. Has she had many visitors? Has she given any more dinner-parties? And what has become of the ghost?"

"The ghost?"

"Yes. Don't you remember the ghost I saw looking into the conservatory?"

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Implicitly."

"And in spirit-rapping?"

"I think so, though they never come to rap at *my* door. I believe in everything, Mrs. Roy. That is to say, I believe in one thing as much as another."

She looked grave.

"I don't like to hear you speak so, and you don't mean it, I know. Lord Fitzowen, do you remember what I told you the other night about the ways of society? I cannot understand them. Have people no likings, no affections, no feelings, above all, no standard of right and wrong? or do they simply make a point of *never* saying what they mean? You have lived in the great world;

you belong to it yourself. Perhaps you will explain."

"I will if I can," he answered. "You know I promised to be your dictionary."

"It was kind of you, if you *meant* it. I have thought so very often. I do indeed require a dictionary more than most people."

"Then being yours, I shall at once turn over a new leaf."

"Most men in your position ought to do that," she answered, still thinking of Miss Bruce. "But will you be serious for a moment, if I ask you a question?"

"To please *you*, I will. For no other consideration on earth."

"Then tell me why it is that only poor people and servants are ever in earnest about anything. Mr. Roy is as bad as the others. You are all alike, and it seems to me you don't speak English. If it pours with rain, you call it 'moistish'; if the sun shines, you admit 'it's not half a bad day.' When young Mr. Slowman's horse ran away, and I said it was a great mercy he wasn't killed, Mrs. Granton added, 'and a great pity, too,' and all the company laughed. The Browns have lost every shilling they possessed, but Mr. Roy only thinks 'it's rather a bore for Brown'! Even when that horrid woman left her husband the other day, and it got into all the newspapers, nobody seemed to consider the wickedness, but everybody exclaimed, 'How could she be such a fool!' Are you really without heart and principles,—do you think it good manners to appear so?"

"There is affectation in every class, Mrs. Roy," answered Fitz, plunging boldly into the question, as knowing he must soon be out of his depth; "and

all affectation is vulgarity more or less. In our horror of one extreme, we fall into the other; and for fear we should seem dramatic, we cease to be real. So we are vulgar, too, in our way. And yet what would you have? It would never do for us to go about proclaiming our likes and dislikes—our hopes, feelings, and opinions. We should be ridiculous; worse than that — tiresome. So we agree to play with counters instead of money, and it comes to the same thing when you are used to the game. Why, if I was to tell you what I am really thinking at this moment, how do I know you wouldn't ring the bell and have me turned out of the house?"

She drew herself up, and looked quite capable of acting precisely as he described; but before her pride could take offence he rattled on into smooth water again.

"I don't care—I'll risk it with *you*, and run my chance. I was thinking what a flat my friend Roy is to be working like a slave up to his middle in dripping underwood when he might be sitting warm and dry by this comfortable fire in the best of company, over an excellent cup of tea. You haven't rung the bell yet, so I would go on, only I have nothing more to say."

"You have said quite enough," she answered laughing, "when you presume to call Mr. Roy 'a flat.' But he never takes tea now, as he used; and gentlemen seem to find a charm that is perfectly unaccountable in chopping their own trees."

"I am so glad I never had any trees. Not that it matters, for I suppose I should have cut them all down. But you are making me forget everything it is my duty to remember. Now what do you think brought me here this afternoon?"

Nobody so good-looking as Nelly could be less of a coquette. Still, it was not in woman's nature to suppress the obvious rejoinder—

"I suppose it was in order to pay *me* a visit."

"Not a bit. You like people to be rude and sincere, so now I am going to tell you the truth. I made it *an excuse* to pay you a visit, that I freely admit, but I came charged with a message from Miss Bruce. The hounds meet to-morrow three miles from this house. She is not going to ride, and would call for you in the carriage if you choose to come. It is a favourite place, and I think I can promise you will be amused."

Nelly's grey eyes sparkled. "I should like it of all things," she answered. "Do you know, I have never seen a hunt in my life! Only I'm afraid it's cruel," she added as an afterthought.

"You must not say, 'seeing a hunt.' Your dictionary tells you to call it 'going out hunting'; and as for being cruel, it's—it's—in fact, quite the reverse. Then I may tell Miss Bruce you will drive with her?"

"I must ask Mr. Roy. I will, most certainly, if he has no objection."

"What objection *could* he have? I suppose he's not afraid to trust you with Miss Bruce."

"If *you* are not, I don't see why *he* should be," answered Nelly, still harping on her own erroneous conclusion.

He looked mystified, but proceeded to the practical details of their expedition.

"Then she will be at your door at half-past ten. Don't ask her to get out, because she will be wrapped up for all day; and if you take my advice, you will put on your warmest clothes too. It's sure

to be cold crossing the downs. You must go by the old Roman road. I daresay you don't know the shortest way out of your own woods. Where's the Ordnance Map? I can show you in five seconds."

Now the Ordnance Map, notwithstanding that it was referred to three or four times every day, hung, for greater convenience, in the most remote corner of the library; so Mrs. Roy and her visitor adjourned there forthwith; the latter, as his hostess piloted him across the darkening hall, professing grave apprehensions lest they should meet the ghost!

It was already dusk. John Roy, in his wet clothes, made the best of his way home, following a narrow path through some thick-growing evergreens that led direct to the house. Here he came into collision with an advancing form, shadowy and indistinct enough, but far too substantial in its proportions for a disembodied spirit of any kind.

On one side a scream was suppressed, on the other an oath was *not*; but Mrs. Mopus, perhaps because she expected him, recognised her master before the familiar voice broke out with—

"Who the devil are *you*? And what are you doing here?"

"It's only *me*, sir," she answered softly. "I thought you would be coming home this way, and I slipped out to meet you, Mr. Roy; that's the truth. It's right that somebody should be careful of your health, you that never thinks of yourself. I said you'd be as wet as a sop, and so you are; but you wouldn't go and change, not if it was ever so, unless I begged and prayed it of you, as I always used. I've done my duty by you, Mr. Roy, for a

many years, and I'll do it still ; whether others does or doesn't, it won't alter me."

"I believe you have a regard for me, Mopus," he answered kindly. "But you are always over-anxious, and make a fuss about nothing."

"Old servants will, sir," she replied. "We know when we've got a good master, Mr. Roy. I've laid down dry things to air at your dressing-room fire, sir. That valet of yours is no more use than a post. No doubt Mrs. Roy would have seen to it herself, but she's engaged in the drawing-room with a visitor."

"Is he not gone *yet*?" escaped from John Roy's lips, with an involuntary expression of surprise.

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered the house-keeper. "It's no business of mine, sir, to watch the gentlemen as comes to visit your lady. I keep to my place, I hope, Mr. Roy, though, of course, my thoughts are my own."

"Thoughts! What do you mean by your thoughts?"

"Well, sir, you mustn't pay much attention to what I say ; I'm a little upset this afternoon with one thing and another, and I can't forget you've been a kind master to me for many a long day. Get into the house, sir, as quick as you can, and change from head to foot."

Now the shortest way into the house was by the drawing-room windows, of which the shutters had not yet been closed for the night ; and past these windows Mrs. Mopus thought well to follow in her master's wake, though her own dominions lay in another wing. Suddenly she came alongside, and addressed him in a troubled whisper. "I ask your pardon," said she—"I've deceived you, sir, regarding the gentleman who came to visit Mrs.

Roy. He must be gone long ago. See, there's nobody left in the drawing-room, and the fire is nearly out."

"All right, Mopus," he answered, shutting the house-door; but he muttered to himself as he tramped upstairs, "That woman must be going out of her senses. What can it signify to *me* whether there's anybody in the drawing-room or not?"

Nevertheless, during the process of undressing, her words and manner recurred to him more than once, always with increasing uneasiness and a vague feeling of suspicion.

Did she mean anything? *If* she meant anything, why couldn't she speak out? Was there anything to mean? Anything wrong going on in the household that he ought to know? She seemed to imply as much. No doubt it would come out in good time—to-morrow or next day. He need not worry himself. Nelly would see to it, and put everything right. Then he started in his slippers, and rushed to the window. The clatter of hoofs could be heard from the stableyard, and Fitzowen's good-humoured voice conversing with the helper who led his pony out.

For one moment the room seemed to turn round, the next, he muttered, "It's impossible!" and resumed his dressing calmly and methodically as before. But the "it" was not so easily shaken off; and after attending him through the successive stages of his toilet, accompanied him downstairs to assist at a *tête-à-tête* dinner with his wife.

Nelly was brilliant, and seemed in better spirits than usual. She looked forward with pleasure to her expedition on the morrow, and felt gratified by Lord Fitzowen's kindness in coming to suggest it

to-day. John Roy, on the other hand, ate little and spoke less; but, contrary to his usual habits, which were strictly temperate, drank two or three glasses of wine in quick succession.

It is one of the drawbacks to matrimony that two people are seldom precisely in the same humour at the same time. Should the husband be helped twice to mutton, the wife is pretty sure to send her plate away untouched. If *he* is inclined to talk, *she* probably has a headache, and the lady is prone to broach subjects involving personal discussion when the gentleman wants to go to sleep. While the servants were in the room, Nelly did her best, but it is hard to keep the shuttlecock of conversation going with only one battledore, and as she originated topic after topic they fell successively to the ground. At last, when dessert was placed on the table and the door shut for the last time, she made a great effort and asked her husband point-blank, "What is the matter?"

"Why?"

It was a discouraging reply, and she continued timidly—"You seem out of spirits, dear, and you scarcely ate a morsel. Either you didn't like your dinner, or else you're not well."

"The dinner was no worse than usual," he answered ungraciously; "and I don't see why you should say I'm not well because I can't jabber about nothing with three servants in the room. A man needn't ask his wife to excuse him, I suppose, whenever he feels tired?"

"Or cross," she replied hastily, for his tone cut her to the quick.

"Or bored," was the unkind rejoinder. "I think that's nearer the mark!"

Her eyes filled with tears, and after five minutes of painful silence she left the room.

But in less than half an hour her sweet and generous temper reasserted itself. When tea came she gave him his cup with as bright a smile as usual, drew his arm-chair to the fire, and handed him the newspaper as if no cloud had ever come between them. Even bent her beautiful head over him to whisper softly that she "had spoken in haste, and begged his pardon, because she was in the wrong."

John Roy's heart smote him, and for a moment he esteemed her as "excellent a wench" as ever Othello thought Desdemona: but again there came between them the vague and unacknowledged shadow cast by the inexplicable bearing of his housekeeper, and he could not refrain from asking himself over and over again, though not without a certain bitter self-contempt, "What *could* Mrs. Mopus mean?"

CHAPTER XII

BURTON BRAKE

"NOT going to ride!" exclaimed Miss Bruce, who was presiding over half a dozen guests at the breakfast-table, as Lord Fitzowen appeared in his usual morning dress, with one arm still disabled and in a sling. "I thought your shoulder was better; this *is* a disappointment. Consider, Lord Fitz, your new friend Mrs. Roy won't see you in a red coat."

"Don't hit a fellow when he's down, Miss Bruce," answered his lordship, walking to a well-covered side-table. "I'm hardly man enough to ride my brown horse with both hands; he would have it all his own way if I tried to steer with one. No; if you'll have me, I'm going to drive with *you*."

"I understand," replied Hester. "Yes, you shall come with us if you feel equal to taking care of two ladies. It's very touching, I must say, when I think of all you are giving up. Burton Brake's the only good place on that side of our country."

"I would give up anything for the pleasure of driving with *you*, Miss Bruce."

"And Mrs. Roy, Lord Fitz. Your memory is very short; you seem to have forgotten Mrs. Roy."

"John Roy's new wife!" exclaimed one of the

red-coats, stretching a scarlet arm out for toast. "Is *she* going with you, Miss Bruce? They tell me she is as handsome as paint; but nobody knows where she came from. Wasn't she an actress, or a shopwoman, or something?"

"Ask Lord Fitzowen," said Hester.

"Actress! shopwoman! Nothing of the kind," replied that nobleman, provoked to feel, for the first time since he left Eton, as if he was going to blush. "She is as ladylike a person as ever you saw. Amiable, accomplished, well-mannered, and —and—that's all I know about her."

It seemed a lame conclusion, provoking general laughter, during which the carriage was announced, and, as a couple of hacks had been trampling the gravel before the windows for the last ten minutes, it was voted time to be off.

So early a start did not seem necessary from Royston Grange, which was some miles nearer the place of meeting. Its master could therefore enjoy two rather unusual luxuries on a hunting morning, a leisurely toilet and an unhurried breakfast. In his red coat, white leathers, top-boots, and bright spurs, all well-cleaned and well put on, John Roy looked no unfavourable specimen of the English gentleman, and we may be sure Nelly thought so too. She had not yet seen him often enough in this striking attire for the admiration, mixed with wonder, which it produced, to have palled on her unaccustomed eyes, though she was less impressed than a certain damsel totally unused to the society of sportsmen who married a friend of my own many years ago.

If this lady ever heard of fox-hunting, she had no idea that any special dress was required for that amusement. Hitherto she had only seen a

scarlet coat on the back of a British soldier or a royal footman. Language is powerless to convey her feeling of terror and dismay when in the third week of their honeymoon, on the first Monday in November, her husband came down to breakfast gorgeous from head to foot in full hunting costume.

She felt she was bound for life to a madman; an illusion that the experience of many succeeding Novembers failed entirely to dispel.

"I like you so much in your red coat," said Nelly, with her frank, bright smile, as Mr. Roy, moving more stiffly than usual, took his place at the breakfast-table. "Only I wish, I *do* wish hunting was not so dangerous!" Every man in his heart would be thought "prodigal of his person," but he was too honest not to admit, though he went straight enough when the hounds ran, that with good horses, well-ridden, he reduced the risk of crossing a country to a minimum.

"Wait till you've been out and seen us ride, Nelly," he answered pleasantly, "you'll never think it dangerous again."

Last night's ill-humour had vanished; coming clouds were as yet below the horizon. He felt in high spirits, anticipating no little enjoyment from the day's sport. If he was pleased, *she* was happy, and while she pinned a hothouse flower in his buttonhole and gave him a parting kiss, she felt as if the old days had come back once more. The old days! how old were they, after all? She could count the intervening time by weeks, and yet there seemed a break, a gap, a gulf between then and now.

As his distance from the meet was but three miles, Mr. Roy rode from the door on the hunter he intended to keep out all day. Nelly watched

Mr Roy rode from the door

man and horse till they disappeared, with a swelling heart. How she admired her husband, how she loved him! Surely she had everything she wanted in the world — what was this vague misgiving? this shadowy foreboding of evil, that haunted her at every turn?

There was no time for such speculations. Already an open carriage might be seen bowling along the avenue, and Mrs. Roy, with innate good-breeding, flew upstairs to put on her things, that she might not keep Hester waiting at the door.

It was no unpleasant surprise to find Lord Fitzowen buttoned up in an ulster coat, occupying the front seat of the barouche. With her usual frankness, Nelly told him so, and wondered why Miss Bruce should look more amused, and his lordship more pleased, than the occasion seemed to warrant.

But she had never been out hunting before, even on wheels, and all other feelings were soon lost in the novelty and excitement of the situation.

"It was like taking a child about," said Hester, describing their drive the same afternoon to Sir Hector at tea. "I mean to be fonder of Mrs. Roy than anybody in the county. She *is* a dear thing, papa—so fresh, so honest, and so charmingly unsophisticated! When we overtook the hounds in the Fosse Road, she actually clapped her hands with delight. We couldn't help laughing, and she *did* look perfectly beautiful when she blushed. I am sure Lord Fitz thought so too."

Miss Bruce was right; his lordship enjoyed his day's hunting even more than his companions, though it must be confessed that some of Mrs. Roy's questions on the noble science puzzled him exceedingly.

Like most ladies, she seemed interested in riding rather than hunting, in horses rather than hounds. It was no easy matter to satisfy her shrewd and inquiring mind as to the powers of a good hunter, and what fences should or should *not* be attempted in the hurry of the chase. Did not Mr. Roy's bodily safety depend on the solution of such problems?

Pointing to some strong ash rails nearly five feet high, with a wide ditch on the landing side into the road, along which they were driving—"Could your horse leap *that*, Lord Fitzowen," she asked, "or would it be impossible? I hope it would!"

He felt constrained to admit, however forbidding this obstacle might appear, there were many good hunters that, properly ridden, could clear it without a mistake.

"Then if you came to it, you would go over, of course?" she continued, looking anxiously in his face.

Hester's mirthful eyes were on him, and he was obliged to tell the truth.

"I would rather go round by Warden Towers," said he. "I would rather lose the best run that ever was seen. I would rather never go out hunting again!"

"But why, if it's not impossible?"

"Why? Mrs. Roy—why? Well, I suppose, because I am afraid!"

She looked immensely relieved, and seemed able now to turn her attention with unalloyed enjoyment to the business of the hour.

This commenced from the moment they arrived at the place of meeting. Such of the county gentlemen as had not yet been introduced reined

in their horses and made their bows as gracefully as bridles and hat-strings would permit. Miss Bruce was a general favourite, but her companion seemed, to-day, the centre of attraction; and many glances of unqualified admiration, from sportsmen of all ages and sizes, were launched at the open carriage where sat "Roy's new wife."

She looked about for her husband in vain. He came by a shorter way than the party in the carriage, and, as he rode slowly, arrived only when the hounds moved off for the covert. He quickened his pace then, and stole quietly down to a certain corner which experience taught him was the likeliest place for a good start.

Burton Brake, a straggling covert of brushwood and blackthorn, on the side of a hill, lay immediately under a wide tract of downs. It was a favourite resort of foxes; and, for some unexplained reason, they usually went away from it at the low side, to make a distant point across the Vale. This was a flat, strongly fenced district, consisting chiefly of grass, without a canal, or a river, or a railroad, or even an impracticable brook. Its farmhouses were few and far between; its enclosures large, and wire was unknown. In good scenting weather, it afforded almost the certainty of a run, and, if he had a choice, a man did not bring his *worst* horse to Burton Brake.

"He's away!" exclaimed Miss Bruce, as the quick notes of a horn came wafted up the hill on the light easterly breeze.

"Who?" asked Nelly, shaking with excitement.

"The fox, my dear, of course. Look! I can see the leading hounds. There, to the left of the tall ash. Three or four specks of white in that

large green field. They're all coming though, and the huntsman, and a black coat, and four, five, six, red! Now they're at the fence. Capital! One down, I'm afraid; and he's let his horse go! Oh! I wish I was on Safeguard! They're going to have the best run that ever was seen!"

Fortunately for Nelly's peace of mind, the fallen sportsman wore a dark coat, and therefore could not be her husband. She fancied, indeed, that she made him out amongst the half-dozen riders who were nearest the hounds.

Somehow it seemed less dangerous than she had supposed, and infinitely better fun. Her companions, too, were as eager for the sport as if they had never been out hunting before. Already they were consulting as to the best line for a carriage to travel in the direction of the chase.

"Into the Fosse again, Peter," said Lord Fitzowen to the coachman. "Then to the right and keep on the high ground. If they turn to the downs, we shall command them all the time."

"No, no, Lord Fitz," protested Hester. "He went away like a good fox, and with this wind he'll make his point for Brierley Bottoms. We had a nice gallop over the same line three weeks ago. There—I can see them bending to the left. Into Marigold Lane, Peter! down to Burton-Hayes, and if we don't come up with them at the Purlieus, make for Brierley Steeple as fast as you can!"

So Peter started his horses at so smart a trot as soon became a canter; using such despatch, indeed, in Marigold Lane, notwithstanding its ruts and inequalities, as to overtake divers second-horsemen, a colt-breaker, a boy on a pony, and several more laggards of the chase.

"Do you think we shall ever see them again?" asked Nelly, straining her eyes to scan the extreme distance, eight or nine miles off. "I should like to know what becomes of the fox; only, I hope they won't kill it, poor thing!"

"I hope they *will*!" replied Miss Bruce. "Why, my dear Mrs. Roy, that's the one thing that makes a good run perfect. Look out! Lord Fitz. If they're coming to the Purlieus you ought to see something of them at the next turn."

"By Jove! there they are! Miss Bruce, you're a witch. No. You're a capital judge of hunting. They're checked, I do believe. They're all standing still in the lane. Bravo! they've hit it off again. Look! Mrs. Roy. Do you see the sheep running? That's the line of the fox. The hounds are right! he's crossed the brook. Now we shall have some fun!"

"It's practicable enough," said Hester. "I jumped it on Gondolier last season."

"They don't seem to think so. Hurrah! three fellows are going to have it—four! five! Well done! There are two over, and one, I think, in for all day!"

Even at so long a distance Nelly's loving eyes had recognised her husband. He was safely landed on the right side, yet she turned pale to realise the risk he had run.

"One of those is Mr. Roy," she observed softly. "How beautifully he rides!"

"I didn't know he was out," commented Lord Fitzowen; "I never saw him at the meet. You're quite right, Mrs. Roy, he *can* ride when he likes. He's going like a bird to-day."

He *was* going well. A skilful horseman, experienced in sport, riding a practised hunter that

answered every turn of his hand, every pressure of his limbs, he found no difficulty in keeping close to the pack. Fence after fence, and field after field, were disposed of with the ease and confidence attained by a combination of good nerves, good riding, good condition, and good blood.

He went in and out of the lane not twenty yards from his wife, but so intent was he on the hounds and the management of his horse that he saw neither the carriage nor its occupants.

Nelly watched him with her heart in her eyes. The others, under pressure of that mysterious law which compels everybody out hunting to get somewhere else in a tremendous hurry, were giving Peter many contrary directions, that caused him, however, to put his horses into a gallop, and make for a turnpike road with the utmost despatch.

Over its harder surface those who hunted on wheels were able to hold their own with the riders. They overtook, indeed, more than one defeated sportsman, disappointed that his horse could not gallop on for ever, or so far behind that he had pulled up in disgust; but, in either case, plunged in the lowest depths of misery, just as the first flight were raised to the seventh heaven of enjoyment.

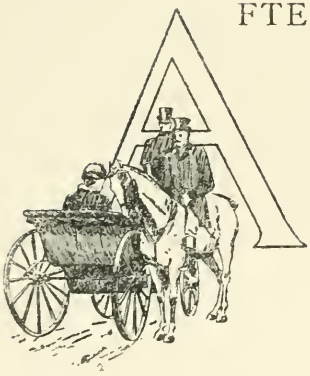
"There's Brierley Steeple!" exclaimed Hester, pointing to the distant spire with a taper gloved hand. "It's downhill all the way to the village, and a capital road. I'll never pilot anybody again, if we don't come up with them now!"

But though Miss Bruce was right, and her knowledge of fox-hunting did not mislead her when she named Brierley Bottoms as the probable conclusion of the chase, it had come to a triumphant termination long before she could arrive at the

rough and broken ravine. The fox had been eaten, the huntsman praised, the chosen few had exchanged enthusiastic compliments and congratulations. When the carriage stopped amongst them they were already lighting their cigars and preparing to go home.

CHAPTER XIII

SWEET SYMPATHY



AFTER a storm comes a calm; after keen excitement, a reaction, partly welcome for its repose, partly saddening for its depression. He who has been so fortunate as to go from end to end of a run with fox-hounds, to his own satisfaction, feels, strange to say, as if he had performed a good action. The past, which is perhaps capable of affording more definite pleasure than either the present or the future, seems truly delightful, till his blood cools down. Then he comes back into the world of reality, somewhat chilled and dispirited, as everybody, after childhood, must be, on first waking up from a dream.

John Roy caught sight of the carriage containing Nelly and her friends as he put his horse into a trot on the firm surface of the high-road—pleased to find that, after standing about for a quarter of an hour, the good animal, notwithstanding its exertions, was neither stiff nor lame. He was disposed to be praised, and, so to speak, patted on

the back for his prowess, considering with reason that he had acquitted himself more than creditably in a manly exercise. It was as if cold water had been poured down his back to observe Lord Fitzowen gesticulating on the front seat of the barouche, opposite his wife. He had not once thought of Fitz all the morning, nor, truth to tell, of Nelly, for more than fifty minutes. A wife's image is the last that occurs to a man while hounds are running hard—the juxtaposition of these two reminded him of them in the most unwelcome manner. He felt cross and put out—all the more that he was unable to explain why—and did not care if one of the offenders, or both, should be made aware of his ill-humour.

Hester, in a high state of excitement, was the first to accost him.

"What a good gallop, Mr. Roy! How I've been envying you! We went very well, considering we were in a carriage, and kept you in sight all the time!"

Of course the ruder he meant to be to his wife, the more politeness he showed Miss Bruce.

"You ought to have been on Safeguard or Gondolier," said he, with a most amiable smile. "It would have suited you exactly. Five-and-forty minutes, only one check, lots of jumping, and not above half a dozen fellows with the hounds."

Nelly tried in vain to catch his eye.

"We saw you," she exclaimed eagerly. "I was so frightened when you came to the river—the brook, I mean—Lord Fitzowen won't let me call it a river. How brave of you to leap it! I shut my eyes for fear you should be drowned, and when I opened them, there you were, safe over—

the dear horse! I'm not afraid of horses. I should like to stroke his nose!"

Pained, disappointed, she looked imploringly in her husband's face, while he left her unnoticed to continue his conversation with Miss Bruce.

"We never touched the Purlieus. He was too hot to go in, and he left Burton-Hayes half a mile to the right, so that it was almost straight, and grass every yard. From Burton Brake to Brierley can't be less than nine miles on the map—we must have come fully eight as the crow flies. It has been a real good thing. As far as I can make out, it's the same line you went three weeks ago, before the frost. No doubt it was the same fox; but he'll never show you a run, Miss Bruce, any more."

"I'm sorry they killed it!" exclaimed Nelly, addressing herself to Lord Fitzowen, as nobody else seemed inclined to listen. "The poor fox! Think how happy he was this morning before we came. Curled up, fast asleep, among the bushes, like one's own dog on the hearth-rug. It *does* seem hard. Why must the pleasure of one creature be the pain of another? Why is there so much misery in the world?"

Such questions involved a train of deeper thought than Lord Fitzowen was in the habit of following out, and he answered vaguely—

"Yes, of course. It's a great pity, and all that. Still, you know, Mrs. Roy, when you go to find a fox, you must let the hounds hunt him, you know, and kill him if they can. It's wonderful how often they can't!"

She was trying to catch her husband's eye. What was there wrong? Why wouldn't he speak to her? She made one last despairing attempt.

"Mr. Roy," she said timidly, "couldn't—

couldn't the servant take your horse, and you ride home in the carriage with us?"

He turned hot all over, feeling also that "he did well to be angry" now. These solecisms were intolerable! To offer him a seat in another lady's carriage was bad enough, but to propose he should *ride* in it! The woman would drive him mad!

Drawing his horse out of reach, for she was trying to pat its neck, he disposed of her ill-timed suggestion with the coldest of looks and in the unkindest of tones.

"I need not thank you for an invitation," said he, "that is not yours to give, and as I am rather wet, I prefer *riding* my horse to the *drive* you are good enough to offer me in a carriage that is not your own!" Then he took off his hat to Miss Bruce and disappeared.

Nelly was cut to the heart. Her eyes filled with tears. She had some difficulty in preventing their falling on her hands, and she was truly grateful to Lord Fitzowen when he diverted Hester's attention with an announcement that one of the horses was going lame. By the time the carriage could be stopped, and a pair of legs and feet carefully examined to account for an infirmity that did not exist, Mrs. Roy had recovered her composure, and Fitz had earned an eternal claim to her gratitude and goodwill.

People are never so susceptible of kindness as when wounded by their nearest and dearest; nor is any gleam of sunshine so pale and watery, but that we welcome it on a wet day.

Nelly seemed sadly out of spirits during the rest of the drive. Miss Bruce, with a woman's quickness of perception, did not fail to detect something wrong. Lord Fitzowen accounted for feminine

uneasiness of mind and body on a theory of his own. It originated, he believed, in a disorder peculiar to the sex, called "nerves," of which the seat, causes, and remedy were as yet undiscovered by science, and with which all the resources of medicine were powerless to contend.

But when they had dropped Nelly at her own door, declining the refreshment of tea, which she nearly omitted to offer, his anxiety prompted him to ask Hester whether she thought Mrs. Roy was as strong as she looked. "People ought not to tire so easily, Miss Bruce," he observed gravely. "No lady can be well who is completely exhausted after a few hours' drive in an open carriage. Why, she hardly spoke a word all the way back; and did you observe how pale she was? Depend upon it she's got nerves; nothing else punishes them like that. It's a most distressing malady, worse than measles, and they don't get over it for weeks."

"Very likely," answered Hester. "You seem to know all about it. I never had them myself, and I hope I never shall. Now you are to go on with the carriage, Lord Fitz, and tell papa I shall be home in half an hour. No, I rather like the walk, and I am not afraid of crossing our own park by myself at any hour of the day or night. Besides, I shall be back long before dark."

"Mayn't I come with you?"

"Certainly not; you turn my dear old ladies into ridicule, and I won't have it."

"But if I promise to be on my best behaviour?"

"Your best behaviour is anybody else's worst! I can't trust you directly my back is turned. You're capable of making faces at them, or any other enormity, if you're not watched every moment.

No, Lord Fitz, do as I bid you, and mind and tell papa I shall not be late."

So Miss Bruce got out of the carriage, to the great delight of such villagers of Nether Warden as chanced to be at their doors or in the street, and passing through a spacious walled garden, disappeared on the threshold of an old red-brick house that professed to have been built in the reign of George II., and looked as if it had never been repaired nor altered since.

Lord Fitzowen proceeded homewards in the carriage; but he, too, preferred to alight and walk the last half-mile of his journey, finding himself, for the first time in his life, so perplexed in mind as to feel disposed for solitary reflection.

This young nobleman's course had been hitherto shaped over smooth water and before a fair breeze. He had scarcely yet had any nut to crack harder than the lameness of a horse. The world had been a pleasant place enough; several people seemed to be put in it on purpose to serve, and a few to amuse him. There might be a certain sameness and want of excitement about life, but if the roses offered little fragrance, the thorns were by no means sharp, and altogether it did very well. What had come to him now, that thus had altered the whole trim and bearings of his character, opening his eyes, as it were, to the knowledge of good and evil, scattering his Epicurean philosophy to the winds? Things to which he had attached a high value seemed all at once of no importance, and illusions that he used to consider the wildest and emptiest of dreams sprang into glowing life and reality as at the touch of a magic wand. "Is it my mind," he thought, "that is affected, or—or is it my heart? Let me light a cigar, and look at

the case fairly as it stands. Have I not everything a man can reasonably require to make him happy? Good health, good digestion, good manners, without vanity, a good appearance, and good horses, if they were only sound? What more can a fellow want, in such a position as mine, and amongst the people with whom I live? Is this strange sense of longing, half sweet, half bitter, and wholly inexplicable, only a craving for some new excitement, or is it an effort of the spirit, the soul, the *divinæ particula auræ*, the higher part of one's nature, to assert its individuality, and free itself from the material surroundings with which we encumber it too much? It is not enough for the happiness of a thinking being to eat, drink, and smoke, ride a run, shoot a covert, play a cricket-match, and talk about it afterwards, from day to day, and year to year, till some fine morning the clock stops, the doctor can't wind it up, the umpire gives one 'out,' and so '*Bon soir, la compagnie!*' Why do I feel at this moment as if the finish would be less unwelcome, while yet life seems sweeter than usual? I know why, but I cannot bear to confess it even to myself. I never thought I should come to this!—that I, of all people, should be haunted by tags and ends of verses, should be able to understand what a fellow means when he says—

> A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass,
> A softer sapphire melts upon the sea!

I shall be writing poetry myself next. Already I can make 'ass' rhyme to 'grass,' and 'me' to 'sea.'

"A sensible man would slip his cables, would cut and run, while there was a chance of escape. I am *not* a sensible man; I doubt very much if I

want to be saved from my own destruction. I think I'd rather not. My visit comes to an end to-morrow, but Sir Hector is sure to ask me to stay another week. I *shall* stay another week, I know, and I shall see Mrs. Roy again — perhaps once, certainly not more than twice. Never mind, once is better than nothing. It's no use trying to deceive one's self. I love the very ground that woman walks on — but in all honour, and respect, and regard. I shall never let her find it out, though women are very quick to see things. At anyrate, I shall never tell her so. It would be an insult—an outrage. But I am sure she is not happy. He does not half appreciate her. There *can* be no harm in my thinking of her, watching over her, serving her, and worshipping her in secret, as a true knight worshipped his mistress in the olden time!"

Arriving at this wise conclusion and the hall-door in the same moment, our modern Sir Galahad threw away his cigar, and stalked into the house perfectly satisfied with his own special pleading, and the integrity of his relations towards Mrs. Roy.

CHAPTER XIV

SO FAR AWAY

TWO gaunt women, so like each other that Lord Fitzowen christened them Gog and Magog, rose simultaneously when Hester entered the room. It was pleasant to see the smile of affection that brightened those grim faces while they kissed her forehead, and offered their own brown, leathery cheeks to be saluted in return.

The Miss Brails, or rather the Misses Brail, as they preferred to be called, were two spinsters long resident in Nether Warden, of whom Miss Bruce had made an easy conquest from the first week she had come to live at the Towers. Unlike most old ladies, they owned no pets, never having possessed anything of the kind indeed but a bullfinch that moulted and died ten days after purchase. Their new neighbour, therefore, seemed to infuse an element of affection, mirth, and gladness in their lives, of which, having little experience, they valued the novelty no less than the intrinsic delight. Said Gog to Magog, "We couldn't love that dear girl better if she was a daughter of our own." Answered Magog, unequal to realise the supposed relationship, "Not half so well, my dear. Hester seems like a daughter and a niece and a sister all in one."

Miss Bruce returned their attachment with a

warmth and cordiality that puzzled even Sir Hector, who knew his child's character better than anybody.

"I don't wonder at the old ladies," said he to Lord Fitzowen one day after dinner,—"that's not surprising; everybody likes Hester; one might as well say one didn't like this '64 claret; but what she can see in *them*, that beats me, I own. And I used to think I understood women as well as most people."

A great many men think the same: always the more persistently the less they know of the gentler and subtler sex.

Perhaps only Hester could have told him why she loved Gog and Magog so dearly. It is my opinion, however, that she admitted her reasons even to herself with great reservation, and would have died a hundred deaths rather than confide them to another.

"No, I've not come to tea," explained the visitor, as one hostess felt for her keys, and the other bustled into the passage with the words "Hot buttered toast" on her lips. "It's hours too early. Besides, I must go back and make his for papa. I can't stay a moment. I only rushed in, on my way home, to see that you were both alive. I haven't been here for two whole days."

"Take off your hat and warm your feet," said Gog, while Magog wheeled an arm-chair to the hearth-rug. "It does our very hearts good to see you," continued both spinsters in a breath. "Don't stay a moment more than you ought, but as long as ever you can."

After they had settled her comfortably before the fire, there was a pause in the conversation, borne somewhat impatiently by the young lady, who broke it at last with the single monosyllable—

"Well?"

Gog and Magog looked in each other's faces, and began simultaneously, "Good news, my dear. The best of news. You tell her, sister. No, I will. Dear, dear, it seems like a dream."

"Not both at once," protested Hester, trying bravely to smile, though her face was very pale, and her heart beat fast.

"We've seen a letter," said Gog.

"A *ship*-letter, my dear," interrupted Magog.

"A letter is a letter," observed Miss Bruce, "whether it comes by land or sea. Is the expedition on its way home, and—and—are they all safe?"

She was a brave girl; but, do what she would, her voice trembled and her very lips turned white.

"We have scarcely thought about *all* of them," answered Magog, blowing her nose because tears were in her eyes. "It's enough for us that Coll has been preserved."

"We are selfish creatures," added Gog. "But we have only one nephew left on earth, and he can't be the same thing to other people that he is to us."

Miss Bruce seemed to doubt the position, but this was no time to dispute it, and she could only exclaim, "Then he has got back alive. Thank God!"

"Thank God!" repeated the spinsters reverently, and all three women kept silence for the space of nearly thirty seconds!

"When — when is he coming to see you?" faltered Hester, whose feminine imagination had already overleapt weeks and months, leagues of blue water, duty on board ship, Admiralty leave, and all other practical obstacles at a bound.

"Oh, my dear, we mustn't think of such a treat yet," answered Magog. "He writes from Spitzbergen—you know, that's some place in the Arctic regions, but it's nothing to do with the North Pole. You understand, my sister found it on the map, and it looks a long way off even there. But it is always a stage on the homeward journey; and, as I told her this morning, it does not seem so presumptuous to hope we shall see him back now."

"In a month or six weeks at furthest," said Gog, whose late geographical researches gave her opinion considerable weight. "They have put in to refit, as he calls it, for it seems they couldn't get good butcher's meat nor vegetables, nor anything wholesome to eat up there. I fancy it's a wild, dismal kind of place; but Coll never complains, put him where you will,—never did from a boy. There's his letter, my dear young lady. You can read it for yourself. Doesn't he write a fine clear, bold hand for a sailor? I began to teach him before he could speak plain. What a to-do he made with his pen! His mother said she never saw so many blots on one page in her life before. Ah! she was glad enough to get that dirty piece of paper you have in your hand: but I daresay she never thought who set him his first copy, and in my opinion she ought to have sent it on to my sister and me without losing a post."

Hester did not answer. She was far away among floes and icebergs and eternal snow, with the writer of those flimsy, close-written pages, that had reached her from regions which to us who sit at home at ease are as another world. The very paper seemed redolent of tar, tobacco, salt water, perilous adventure, and the discipline of a man-of-war, as she held it near her face, partly to conceal

her agitation, partly to decipher the clear, fine characters, faded somewhat in their transmission through so many climates, over so wide an expanse of sea. She made it all out, nevertheless, though her own brimming eyes failed her more than once ere she came to an end of the following sketch from a sailor's life in search of the North Pole :—

"H.M.S. 'AURORA,' OFF SPITZBERGEN.

"DEAREST MOTHER,—I wrote you at some length nearly a year ago. You will be expecting another letter soon, but when you get this the Expedition will be well on its way home. I shall hope to see you and all my kind friends in old England once again before next spring. We shall come back with flying colours. If we have failed in our great object (and between you and me I don't think the plank will ever be sawn that shall float our flag under the North Pole), still we have made many important discoveries, and smoothed the way for all who wish to follow in our wake, and fetch the extreme point at which we were turned back. If they can make more northing, let 'em ! I for one will give them three cheers.

"Our skipper has proved himself a trump. I always told you he would, and I should be afraid to say whether officers or men have done their duty most thoroughly and ungrudgingly. I never heard a wry word nor a complaint, and that is something to say, mother, when you are boxed up with your mates, and nothing but your mates, for eleven months at a spell. Jolly cold, too, I can tell you, more than half your time. Our ship's surgeon is as good a chap as ever broke a biscuit. I showed him to you at Portsmouth when you came on board the *Scorpion*, and I remember you thought him *very young*. He looks older now, and so do I ; but ours has been a roughish job, and if he hadn't been wiser than he looked, some of us must have been disrated that time when the lime-juice gave out. We've had no sickness since, and, thank God ! we hope to land the whole ship's company, man for man, with a clean bill of health, able and willing as when they came on board. But it was close shaving with some of us, now and again ; for it's not easy, you know, in these high latitudes to make fair weather of it all your time. A pleasure trip is one thing, and a voyage of discovery another. I had rather a squeak for it myself, and I thought my mate—as fine a young fellow as ever stepped—must have left his bones, for he had very little else to leave, many a league within the Arctic Circle. It's a long story, what we call a *yarn* at sea, but you would like to know, and I will tell you all about it.

"After we had taken up a warm berth, and made the ship snug for the winter amongst the ice, we were told off in exploring parties, well found in dogs, sledges, and rations, to cruise about here, there, and everywhere, by compass, you understand, but always creeping,

inch by inch, towards the north. When it came to my turn of duty I had the command of one of these—six in number, all told—three foretop-men, a gunner's mate, the ship's carpenter, and myself. I need not tell you how many days we were absent, nor how little way we made in proportion to the labour and the hardship, and at last the bodily suffering we had to undergo. Our bluejackets don't sing out before they're hurt, nor yet for some little time after, I fancy; and mine were as smart a lot of men as you could pick from the whole ship's company. But flesh and blood can't make it out in such stress of weather as we had to face, when the stores got low, and at last we were forced to separate. I sent three of the men back to the ship, carrying with them the fourth, who was disabled, on the only sledge left. The other had been burned for firewood, and the dogs —don't turn sick, mother—killed and eaten, long ago. I pushed on one more day's march with the carpenter, however, to take the bearings of a long, low spit of land that wasn't down in any of our charts, and I thought, God forgive me! what a fine thing it would be for this unknown promontory to be called ever after by my own name, Cape Collingwood, we'll say, or, perhaps, Cape Brail! Well, if this was vanity I took my punishment for it smart and soon. We never made it out after all. There were great fissures in the ice to be weathered, and for every cable's length ahead we were bound to walk, or, I shall say to roll and tumble, like a brace of black fish, for a league.

"The third day it came on to blow a whirlwind,—of snow, mind you. We lost our bearings; we lost our own backward track; we knew that of our mates must have been covered long ago. There was nothing for it but to steer by compass, in hope of making the ship before our strength gave out completely from fatigue and starvation.

"Till I overhauled the ship's log afterwards, I could not have told you how many days we were out, drifting over the ice, without a morsel of food. We lost count of them, for as we got weaker in our bodies we turned queer in our heads. Giddy and snow-blind, one of us would fall now and again, unable to see where he set his feet, and it was a job for his mate to put him back on his pins. Had both been down at once, we should never have got up any more.

"At last the carpenter turned silly altogether. He plodded on soberly enough, but wandered in his talk, jawing incessantly of the garden at home, and the beehives. What should make a man think of beehives at the North Pole?—and running water?—he heard it behind him, he declared, and must go back to see for himself. Then I had to pinion his arms and force him to keep with me. It wasn't much of a struggle, we were as weak as two cats; still we kept walking on, like men in a dream.

"It seemed lonely enough, but we didn't ask for company; at least, not for the company that dropped in on us when we were at our lowest and worst. I've heard of a man being followed step for step by a ghost. I don't know how he liked it, but I think no ghost could have followed quieter, softer, with a more stealthy, even noise-

less foot, than the creature that was waiting on us, sometimes forty, sometimes twenty, sometimes not more than ten paces in our wake. There is no animal so patient, so wary, so sagacious, and so persevering as the white Arctic bear, when he has made up his mind for a meal.

"I couldn't hear him, he stepped so smooth and silent, pace for pace with ourselves; but somehow, before I turned and saw him, I *felt* he was there!

"The brute knew well enough we must soon sink from fatigue. He could finish us off then without risk or trouble, so was quite content to wait, and eat us up at his leisure.

"I don't think the carpenter knew anything about this ugly consort. He kept rambling on with his beehives and his running water. When he spoke loud, the bear would fall back a little; when his voice sank, it came on with longer strides. At last I fancied I could hear its breathing, and the fall of its flat, soft paws on the snow.

"My mate stumbled and came down. We were both so weak that with all my exertions I could not get him up again. Faint and breathless I rested for a minute by his side. The bear reared itself on end, as if to see what it could make of us, and, finding both motionless, came on steadier than before.

"I had a single-barrelled gun, loaded with slugs. I kept them for the chance of a seal. It would have been sheer madness to use such a charge except at close quarters, and I lay quiet like a dead man behind my mate's body, with my finger on the trigger.

"How I cursed the creature's cunning, and the time it kept me in suspense while it stopped and snuffed and walked in circles round us, as if it had some suspicion of the trick. My mate was very drowsy, and I knew well that if once he went to sleep it would be all over. Forty winks in such a cold as that means never unbuttoning your eyelids again!

"But the beast was hungry—famished. I could see threads of slaver waving over its breast and paws. After a minute or two it could resist no longer, and stole softly on to us, stirring the carpenter with its nose, as if to make sure he was really dead.

"Then I pulled. The muzzle of my gun was close under its shoulder, and the charge passed through its heart like a bullet. I jumped up among the smoke, and used all the strength I had left to haul my mate out of reach, lest it should strike him in the death-flurry; but the creature made a decent end enough, going off quiet and easy, like a Christian.

"'Turn and turn about,' says I; 'you meant to eat *us*, but I think we shall more likely eat you!' Don't call me a cannibal, mother: I was forced to drink some of the blood warm, to put strength in me, before I could turn to and recover my mate. He was nearly gone; five minutes more would have done his business; but he came to, and he pulled through, even at this moment I could hardly tell you how or why.

"We camped out by the carcass, and fed on it till our strength came back. I don't know how long. We had been seventeen days out, when we returned to the ship. I was proud of what the skipper

said to me, and the men gave us three cheers as we came up the side.

"This is a long story, mother; but I've plenty like it in store for you when we meet. I will say no more now, for I have come to the end of my paper, and it won't be many weeks before you will welcome back, like a bad shilling, your affectionate son,

"COLLINGWOOD BRAIL.

"*P.S.*—Please send this on for my good aunts to read. If it saves trouble, they need not mind showing it to anybody they please."

She would have liked to go over it all again, particularly the postscript, which, by some strange intuition taught her, contained an exceedingly roundabout message for herself; but a woman's first impulse in such cases is to conceal the truth, and she returned the precious sheets with the utmost calmness she could assume.

"I was sure you would be pleased to hear," said Magog, pocketing the document. "You have always interested yourself in him for our sake; and, indeed, if you knew Coll better, I believe you would like him for his own."

Many things might be less improbable; for which reason, perhaps, Miss Bruce did not think it worth while to pursue the subject, but bade the old ladies a hasty farewell, kissing each of them with even greater cordiality than before.

As Gog observed to her sister, when the door closed on their charming visitor, "That girl grows handsomer every day. Did you see what a beautiful colour she had just now, as she went out?"

"It's unwholesome for people to sit over the fire," answered practical Magog; "I only hope she may not take cold on her way home."

Sir Hector, too, thought his daughter seemed in unusual spirits when she gave him his tea. The day's doings, the drive out, the drive back, above

all, the run from Burton Brake, were detailed with more than her customary gaiety and playfulness. Lord Fitzowen, sitting alone with his host after dinner, found his own account completely forestalled. Even the abruptness with which Mr. Roy "snubbed his poor wife" seemed to have been duly reported, and if Fitz grew somewhat prolix over this unpleasant episode, it was more for his own satisfaction than the information of his friend.

Before they adjourned to the drawing-room, however, Sir Hector changed the conversation by warmly pressing his guest to defer the departure fixed for next day, and remain at least a week longer at Warden Towers, an invitation Lord Fitzowen accepted gratefully. "It would be rude to decline," he thought, "when they make such a point of it, and, after all, I should be just as great a fool about her anywhere else as here!"

CHAPTER XV

THE LITTLE RIFT

JOHN ROY, like most men who can command a choice of apartments, had selected the most uncomfortable room in the house for his own. Here he smoked, sulked, wrote his letters, and brooded over his wife's "want of manner" in complete privacy, for even Nelly had been made to understand that, unless by special invitation, her presence was unwelcome in this retreat. It saddened her to reflect for how many hours in the day her husband preferred to be alone. She was beginning to wonder whether he had done wisely in marrying her; to feel, with much bitter heart-searching and humiliation, that she was a clog round his neck; and, indeed, though he ought to have been ashamed to confess it, John Roy told himself the same story over and over again. He compared her with the women he used to meet in London society during his early life, and was so bad a judge as to rate her their inferior because her nature was different from theirs. Yet he would have felt indignant to be told he was the sort of man who could prefer a camellia to a garden-rose.

Though one tried hard to conceal it from herself, and the other from the world, both were conscious of a breach between them that widened day by day,

rendering the husband irritable, captious, and aggressive, the wife nervous, silent, and depressed.

He could not but observe her fading colour and weary, heavy eyes, that seemed afraid to meet his own. When people came to call, she would brighten up; which provoked him exceedingly, although this improvement in her spirits was partly the result of a wish to please him by taking her share in general conversation, partly the natural protest of youth and health against despondency. With none of her visitors did she seem so much at ease as with Lord Fitzowen, and Mr. Roy had already asked himself why, more than once. "Hang him! he's never out of the house!" was the form into which he put his reflections, seeing that ere the run from Burton Brake was a week old his lordship had already called twice.

So John Roy sat after breakfast in his own den, revolving these unpleasant thoughts behind the *Field, or Country Gentleman's Newspaper*, making believe to read its innumerable columns with their miscellaneous contents. "Come in!" he exclaimed impatiently, as a hesitating knock announced an interruption. He thought it was Nelly, and felt so vexed with her that he determined to let her see that he would rather be alone.

It was *not* his wife, but Mrs. Mopus, who shut the door carefully, set her back to it, and stood there, pale, panting, with one hand pressed against her side.

He was prepared to be angry, yet he showed no irritation towards his housekeeper as he laid down the newspaper and asked quietly "What he could do for her?"

"Can I speak a word with you, sir?" said Mrs. Mopus, advancing to the middle of the room and

looking about, as if for a soft place to faint away. "I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir. You'll forgive me, Mr. Roy. It's not of my own free will I come here to-day."

"Then why are you standing there?" was the natural rejoinder, but certain catchings of the breath, which his experience of women had taught him to mistrust, prevented its utterance, and he was content to observe courteously—

"Compose yourself, Mrs. Mopus. You have generally a good reason for everything you do."

To beg of a lady that she will "compose herself" seldom produces the desired effect until after many repetitions and much soothing, by implication no less than in set terms. Mrs. Mopus thought well to gasp, roll her eyes, and wrap both hands in her black silk apron till a shower of tears came to her relief, and she found voice to explain between the sobs—

"Oh, sir! you won't judge hardly of me for my attachment to you and yours. Indeed, Mr. Roy, when I think of harm that's likely to overtake you, I'm that upset I can hardly look in your face and warn of you in time, if indeed it's not too late already; but they do say fore-warned is fore-armed, and though you was to turn me out of doors this moment, without a character or a month's notice, you should never be left in ignorance by *me*. No, not if I was to die for it the next minute. There!"

"I have assured you very often, Mopus, that I am convinced of your regard," he answered kindly. "But if you and I are to understand each other, I must beg you to speak out and tell me what is the matter."

"Mr. Roy, do you never think of the times when you was unmarried? A free, well-spoken,

handsome young gentleman as any lady might be happy to call her own, if she was the highest in the land?"

"Well, what of that? I made my choice and married once for all—good or bad, it's too late to repent now."

"Good or bad, sir. You never said a truer word. When I think of them as would have been proud to take your name, and her as has it this day, but doesn't seem to value it not one halfpenny, it makes me that mad, that—well—that it sets me on to come into this room, though I *am* only a servant, and speak with you, fair and equal, Mr. Roy, like a friend."

"You *are* a friend, Mopus. I am ready to hear all you have to communicate."

"Mr. Roy, you'll excuse me: the lady that you have made my mistress and your wife didn't ought to be neither the one nor the other."

"Take care what you say, Mrs. Mopus. Is this only an expression of opinion, or is it an accusation to which you can bring proof?"

His voice shook, and he was fain to turn his head, that she might not see how his countenance changed. A hundred conflicting feelings were at work in his heart. Could this woman show him a way to the freedom he had of late desired too earnestly? and if so, would he consent to pay the price? To give up Nelly did not seem so difficult, but that she should cease to care for him was another matter altogether. The bare suspicion struck him with a sense of keen and numbing pain. Release might be bought too dear. What if the blow were so roughly dealt that in striking away the fetter it should break the bone!

Mrs. Mopus eyed him narrowly. She had

studied his temper all those years to little purpose if she could not play on it now, like an instrument of music, to wake whatever chord she pleased.

"Mr. Roy," she said, coming a step nearer, "I wish to give up my situation."

"Why, Mrs. Mopus?" he asked, with some discomposure, surprised, no doubt, by the unexpected nature of her attack.

"Because, sir, it is not my place as a servant to speak so free as I could wish. When you have discharged me, Mr. Roy, I cease to be a servant, and my words will come easier, as I said before, from the lips of a humble friend."

"Nonsense! I am not going to lose you for any such foolish fancies. You don't want to leave, my good woman, and I don't want to part with you; I am tired of assuring you that I feel you have my interest at heart. If you know anything that affects my welfare, it is your duty to inform me frankly and without reserve."

"You'll promise not to be angry with *me*, sir. I wouldn't offend you for more than I can say."

"I promise."

"And you'll never disclose who it was as told you, nor mention my name, nor let anybody know that you and me has been talking secrets together on such a matter as this?"

He nodded impatiently.

Mrs. Mopus seemed well accustomed to plotting. She peered cautiously into the passage to make sure nobody was listening, shut the door softly, and came close to her master's chair.

"It's about your lady, sir," she whispered. "Have I your good leave, Mr. Roy, to speak my mind?"

"Go on."

"She's not a lady as ought to be at the head of your house, sir. I pass over her interference with the upper servants and the tradespeople, her pryings about in the kitchen, the scullery, the offices, even to the soft-water pump in the back-yard. I am willing to believe it's the faults of her bringing-up; that's neither here nor there. But she doesn't respect *you*, Mr. Roy; she doesn't think as much of you as she ought. She has a free way with the gentlemen that isn't becoming in *your* lady, and with one in particular. I don't name no names, but I've seen it from the time he came here first. I've kept it down, Mr. Roy, till I thought I should have suffocated, but now you've asked me, sir, and it's come out at last plump and plain!"

Vexation, perhaps, would express the nature of her listener's feelings better than surprise; yet with the common impulse of humanity to be convinced of its own worst suspicions, he came to the point at once and spoke out peremptorily enough.

"Let us understand each other, Mrs. Mopus. You have said too much or too little. You have observed freedom of conduct on the part of my —of Mrs. Roy, in respect to a certain person. I insist on knowing who this person is."

"Well, sir, if I must speak out, it's that there lord. He's in the house now."

John Roy glanced at the clock on his chimney-piece. Half-past eleven—this was a morning visit with a vengeance! If the woman spoke truth in the present instance she was probably right all through.

"You are sure of what you say?" he asked, rising from his chair with some vague idea of immediate action.

"Satisfy yourself, Mr. Roy," was the answer. "They're in the conservatory feeding the gold-fish at this moment. I see them through the back-staircase window as I come down to you."

He was so angry he could hardly trust himself to speak.

"Enough, Mrs. Mopus," he muttered, "I shall not forget your services"; and, regardless of her entreaties that he would calm himself, would do nothing rash, he hurried out of the room and up the back-staircase aforesaid to confront the culprits in the conservatory, and—and—what further steps was he to take when he got there?

This consideration caused him to pause ere he had threaded two dark passages on the way to his destination. He could neither kick, nor shoot, nor turn a gentleman out of the house for paying his wife a visit after breakfast rather than after luncheon, nor would any social code hold him justified in making two persons responsible for a serious offence because they gave his gold-fish their dinners before twelve o'clock in the day!

He stopped—he hesitated—he went on again, still towards the conservatory, but much slower than before. It would be rather tame, he thought, to walk in with outstretched hand and say, "How d'ye do, Fitzowen? Won't you stay to luncheon?" but there seemed nothing else for it, so irresistible are our bonds of custom, our usages of society. The verdict of the world is dead against a man who "puts himself in the wrong," and it is amusing to watch how, even as two practical fighters shift and traverse to get their backs to the sun, so in a personal difference, or an angry correspondence, the belligerents, by dint of argument, reply, and rejoinder, find at last the position completely

inverted, and each occupying his adversary's ground.

"I had better seem to suspect nothing," said John Roy to himself. "I must watch them, and draw my own conclusions unobserved."

His hand was on the conservatory door; he had no intention of eavesdropping; nothing would have induced him so far to lower himself in his own esteem; but he paused an instant to compose his features and pull himself together, as it were, for the ordeal. In that instant his wife's low sweet voice, deepened and softened by emotion, struck on his ear.

"I am horribly afraid of offending Mr. Roy," she said; "but I can trust you unreservedly, and will always do whatever you think best."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MUSIC MUTE

IT was the old story. Neither in conversation nor in literature can you rightly interpret a sentence without the context. Mrs. Roy's compromising words did but conclude a conference of which, as far as she was concerned, loyalty to her husband had been the one predominant motive.

Sir Hector was confined to his room by gout, the other guests had departed; it was impossible for Lord Fitzowen to remain at Warden Towers alone with Miss Bruce, and, sorely against his inclinations, he felt that in common decency he must return to London by the afternoon train. All this he explained at great length, while excusing himself for paying Mrs. Roy so early a visit to wish her good-bye. Perhaps he cherished some vague hope of an invitation to Royston Grange. If so, it was speedily dispelled; for though Nelly assured him frankly enough that she was sorry he must go away, she added in the same breath, "We shall all be better for a little rest. I am a very quiet person, Lord Fitzowen, and we've had so much dining out lately and so many visitors, it will seem quite a relief to be alone."

This was a damper, and he felt it. She spoke as if she would be glad to get rid of him. Fitz

rather lost his head, and became so earnest that she took the alarm.

"I shall be wretched to go, Mrs. Roy. I never was so happy in my life as for this last fortnight, and I have *you* to thank for it." His voice trembled with that suppressed feeling which no woman is too inexperienced to understand.

"You have already thanked me by coming to say good-bye," she answered rather stiffly. "Besides, I don't like to be thanked, Lord Fitzowen, when I have done nothing to deserve it."

She meant him to "keep his distance," and spoke more gravely than usual, but the warmest expressions of goodwill would not have been calculated to rivet his fetters so securely. It is in these ups and downs, these sudden changes, that men become malleable, as the glowing iron is plunged in cold water that it may be tempered into steel.

He skipped back to safe ground with praiseworthy agility. "I like this country so much," he said, "and the hunting and my host and hostess. Don't you think Miss Bruce a very nice girl, Mrs. Roy?"

"I do indeed," she answered, wondering how she could have been so stupid as to forget that, of course, this was the cause of Lord Fitzowen's unwillingness to depart, and resolved to make him amends for her previous misconception. "I like her exceedingly. Not so well as *you* do, I daresay, but very much indeed. She must be sorry to lose you, though I suppose we shall have you back before long."

He stared. Did she want him back? It was but a moment since she had seemed glad he must go away. He would have given a good deal to

read her thoughts, and after all she was only hoping he wouldn't stay to luncheon, and wondering whether she ought to ask him or not!

"One hates saying good-bye," he continued, "and yet there is a melancholy satisfaction in it, too. Let us go and look at the gold-fish, Mrs. Roy. I should not be easy if I went away without taking leave of my earliest friends."

So they strolled into the conservatory, where his lordship, who was not usually so diffident, debated in his own mind whether he dare ask her to give him a sprig of geranium. Had he done so, she would have complied with a readiness that showed how little importance she attached to the gift, but his courage failed him, and he preferred not to run the chance of a refusal, perhaps of another rebuff.

He was sinking deeper and deeper at every step. Had Fitz been wise, he would never have risked this last interview, but would have started for London with his valet and portmanteaus by the twelve o'clock train.

He looked at the gold-fish in silence, almost wishing he was one of them that he might not be going away, then turned to Mrs. Roy and said, with something of a sigh—

"You will miss your dictionary a little, won't you, when it is out of reach on the shelf?"

"I shall indeed," she answered kindly. "I am bad at thanking people, Lord Fitzowen, but I am not ungrateful. I shall never forget how friendly and considerate you have been with me. Though I don't say much, I feel things, I can tell you."

"Whenever you are in any way at a loss, Mrs. Roy, you have only got to speak the word. I would come from the other end of the world to be

of the slightest use. You may want advice now and then about those absurd trifles in which my whole life has been spent."

"I feel dreadfully ignorant sometimes, Lord Fitzowen, I confess. I don't mind for myself, but it vexes my husband. He seems so annoyed with things that I should not have thought of the slightest importance."

He took her hand. "Then we will make a bargain," said he. "You shall be the conjurer and I'll be the Jack-in-the-box. Touch a spring and up he comes! When you've done with him, shut down the lid. Seriously, make any use of me you please when you don't want to trouble our friend. I daresay he hates being bothered. Most men do. I like it. Suppose you are in a dilemma, a social difficulty of any kind, consult me as if I was your cousin, or your brother, or your solicitor. I don't manage my own matters well, but I can give other people better advice than anybody in the world."

There was no resisting the hearty, off-hand manner, the frank, genial tone. Nelly thought she had discovered a wise counsellor, a true friend, and accepted his somewhat vague offer with the grateful little speech that so offended her husband's ears as he came in.

There was an awkward silence. Mrs. Roy looked and felt in a false position, though she could not have explained why. The master of the house seemed by no means master of the situation. Even his lordship, though more used to the kind of thing, was obviously ill at ease. He took the initiative, however, by putting out his hand and informing his host he had ridden over to say "Good-bye."

"Among the flowers," answered John Roy,

looking round him with something of sarcasm, while he exchanged a farewell with his visitor readily enough. It was no prolonged ceremony, and before Nelly's flushed cheeks had faded to their usual tint, Lord Fitzowen vanished, leaving husband and wife alone with the gold-fish.

These could not be more mute than John Roy. He shrugged his shoulders, put on that expression of contempt she most dreaded, and would have retired without a word, but that Nelly's heart was full to overflowing, and the appeal rose spontaneously to her lips—

"What have I done to deserve this? Why are you so cross with me, Mr. Roy?"

"Ask yourself."

"No. I ask *you*. We have not been married a year—nothing like it—and already you are tired of me, and you wish I was dead. You do—you do—and so do I. Anything would be better than this. You hate me, you avoid me. I never see you from day's end to day's end, and when we *are* alone together—which we *never* are—you won't speak to me. I am a clog, an incumbrance, a wet blanket! I can't imagine what it is I have done, or not done. Where are mine accusers? You ought to tell me; I've a right to know."

"When you can talk sense," he answered, "perhaps we may come to some understanding. I confess it seems hopeless now."

"You used to think different. You told me at Beachmouth I was the most sensible woman you ever met."

"That was not saying much. I never had a high opinion of your sex. It does not improve on acquaintance."

"If you think that, it's cruel to tell me. If you

don't think it, you oughtn't to say so. You can be all smiles and good-humour with other ladies. You don't call *them* a pack of fools to their faces I used to believe you cared for me, or else why did you make me an offer? It would have been a long time before I asked *you*, and now you seem to like other people so much better than me!"

"Two can play at that game."

"What do you mean?" she flashed out. "Mr. Roy, I require you to explain yourself."

He set his lips tight, and spoke in cold, cutting syllables.

"Then I *will* explain myself. When a lady receives one of her husband's friends day after day, and at all hours, as you receive Lord Fitzowen, it is rather too good a joke that she should reproach that husband with want of attention to herself."

The tears came to her eyes; he must care for her a little, she reflected, or it would not matter to him how often Lord Fitz chose to call, or how long he stayed, but womanly pride and what is called "proper feeling" prompted her to affect a deeper indignation than she felt.

"Mr. Roy," she said, looking him full in the face, "do you assert what you know, or are you making these accusations against me to put yourself in the right?"

"I make no accusations," he replied in the same hard tone; "it's not worth while; I simply use my own faculties like other people. Things are not likely to escape my observation that have become the talk of my servants in the kitchen and the hall."

She turned pale to her lips. "The servants!" she repeated. "Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Roy,

that you have been discussing with your servants the conduct of your wife?"

He was getting very angry, he felt so completely in the wrong; therefore he affected to take high ground.

"I decline to enter into that subject," said he. "Though *you* may choose to disregard both, there *are* people who respect my character and value my happiness. It is all very well, Mrs. Roy, to carry things with a high hand, to affect injured innocence, virtuous indignation, and so forth, but nobody shall make me believe that lady's conduct is irreproachable on whom her very domestics cry shame. Even if I had not eyes and ears of my own, I can trust my informant, and what I say I mean!"

Her sweet and gentle temper was roused at last. She moved to the door.

"Then if that is the position I occupy in your house," she exclaimed, "the sooner I leave it the better!"

"I wish you had never come into it!"

The action was over. Completely disabled by this last shot, poor Nelly struck her flag and went down. She made no attempt at reply. She did not burst into tears, nor go off in hysterics, nor faint dead away, which is the best resource of all, as placing the adversary in such a position that he can neither run nor fight. She only paced slowly out of the conservatory, across the hall, and up the staircase to her own room, faltering and stumbling, though it was broad daylight, like a blind woman, or one who walks in a dream.

John Roy turned to the gold-fish, and made them a little speech. "I have given her a piece of my mind at last," said he, somewhat ashamed of himself, yet with a certain amount of relief at having

blown off the steam. "A man should begin as he means to go on, and she will be none the worse for the lesson. That it may take proper effect, I shall *not* see her again till dinner-time. My horse is at the door. I may as well have luncheon with the Grantons, and ride round by Warden Towers afterwards, to find out if this young lord is really gone."

Nelly, kneeling by her bedside, crying bitterly with her face smothered in the counterpane, heard his horse's hoofs crunching the gravel, and the click of the gate as he turned into the park.

She went to her window and watched him, hiding behind the curtain. She had often seen him ride away in the same direction, but never so indistinctly as now, through a mist of tears.

Then she bathed her eyes, smoothed her hair, looked at a time-table, rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to be at the door in twenty minutes.

"If I had a baby," thought Nelly, "I couldn't go. I should neither have the heart to leave it, nor to take it away from Mr. Roy. How lucky for *him*! He will be happy at last. He won't miss me one bit. He can live among the people he likes without a wife that he is ashamed of at every turn. And yet I *did* try hard to be all he wished! Oh, my darling, my darling! I do believe my heart is breaking, but I will never see you again!"

Mr. Roy did not enjoy his luncheon. The Grantons were pleasant, as usual. Her two pretty sisters, lately imported by the hostess, did the agreeable with the vivacity shown by young ladies at that most cheerful of meals. But, somehow, it was all flat and insipid. When his horse was brought round, he departed in worse spirits than he arrived, conscious he had made no favourable

impression on the strangers, but utterly careless of their opinion, good or bad.

"Talking him over" ere he was fairly in the saddle, these did not scruple to express unqualified disappointment. Mr. Roy was older, greyer, stupider than they had been led to expect, yet each told herself there was something interesting about the man, something strange, mysterious, peculiar, that she would like to fathom and find out.

At Warden Towers, Sir Hector was in his room and Miss Bruce in the village, so he did not get off. "Was Lord Fitzowen still with them?" he asked carelessly, turning to go away.

"No; his lordship left after luncheon. His lordship's letters were to be forwarded to London. He (the butler) did not think his lordship would be back again during the hunting season."

Riding home in the fading twilight, John Roy began to wonder if he had not judged Nelly too hastily in one particular, perhaps too harshly in all. There is something in the action of a good horse under a man, especially at a gallop, that, possibly through its effect on the liver, seems to clear and stimulate his brain. Ere he rode into his own stableyard our friend had resolved to be forgiving and magnanimous, to read his wife a long lecture on that ignorance of conventionalities to which he was willing to attribute her late misdeeds, and graciously to overlook the past in consideration of the amendment she was sure to promise for the future. Then he would proceed comfortably to dinner, and slumber placidly afterwards, having dismissed the whole subject from his mind.

Wet and muddy, he went to dress at once, rehearsing during his toilet the discourse he intended to deliver, and descending in half an hour or so to

the drawing-room, where he expected to find his wife at her needlework, bright with her usual welcome, and ready to offer the cup of tea she had kept hot in case it should be wanted. But here was neither wife nor tea. The fire had burned low, and only one lamp was lit. His drawing-room had never looked so cheerless. Nelly must be upstairs, of course. How tiresome! Perhaps, though, she had taken his displeasure to heart and was really unwell. Poor dear! she certainly seemed fond of him—he would go to her room and make it all right without delay. Once, twice he tapped at the door. No answer. So he opened it without ceremony, and walked in. Here, too, the fire was low and the room nearly dark, but he could make out that it was unoccupied. More, an empty wardrobe stood open, and though several trinkets remained on the dressing-table, Nelly's ivory hair-brushes, with her monogram, his own gift, were gone.

He turned sick at heart, though he told himself there was no cause for discomposure; but he ran downstairs again, nimbly enough, to ring the drawing-room bell with considerable violence.

The butler had gone to dress, and it was answered by a footman.

"Where is Mrs. Roy?" he asked, trying to speak in his ordinary voice.

"Mrs. Roy, sir? Mrs. Roy is gone, sir."

"Gone! What do you mean? Gone where?"

The man looked surprised. "Mrs. Roy ordered the carriage at half-past two, sir. It took her to the station, and I understand she went to London by the afternoon train."

He fairly gasped. But in whatever attitude he goes down, a man is bound to fall decently, like

Julius Cæsar, before his own household; so he muttered something incoherent about "bad news," and "he thought she would have waited for a later train," but his manner was sorely troubled, his voice came thick and indistinct. The footman retired calmly, less concerned than might be supposed. I imagine our domestics are not easily affected by such symptoms of mental disorder. Judging from analogy, they account for them in the charitable supposition that "Master is a little the worse for drink."

Put him face to face with an emergency, John Roy had courage and presence of mind enough. Both were now supplemented by a strong sense of indignation and ill-usage.

"Gone to London by the afternoon train!" he muttered, walking up and down his deserted drawing-room, in momentary expectation that dinner would be announced. "Of course! I see it all! And that scoundrel, too. They were found out too soon, and she did not dare face me again. But *he* shall, and pretty close too, if we have to travel a thousand miles for it. Steady now! I must look at this business as if I were acting for someone else. The first point is to avoid anything like a show-up before the servants. I can do nothing to-morrow till the post comes in, then I shall go to London by the twelve o'clock train, and find a friend at once. Who is there I can ask to see me through such a three-cornered business? for I mean to shoot Fitzowen as sure as he stands there."

This was a knotty problem, involving some consideration. He had not settled it when he went to dinner, and resolved during the progress of that ceremony, which he sat through with praise-

worthy endurance, to decide nothing till he had visited his club, and seen which of his old friends were in town.

But with all his anger, all his resolution, there were moments during that long cheerless evening when his heart smote him sore. The image of Nelly would pass before him, as he used to watch her moving about the very room in which he sat, busy with some little arrangement for his comfort and convenience, or dearer still, as he remembered her at Beachmouth during that brief courtship, when she had seemed to him a very paragon of womankind, no less for beauty of character and person than for the adoration she lavished on himself.

Of all blessings, a wife is, perhaps, that of which a man becomes most sensible in its loss. John Roy could not help suspecting that he had not himself been entirely without blame; that a little patience, a little consideration, a little forbearance might have preserved to him the affections of her fond and gentle nature, true and tender as when they watched the seagulls together on the southern coast, and thought nothing could ever come between them this side of the grave.

CHAPTER XVII

BAFFLED

FOR one who has ever lived long enough in London to make it a home, there is something in the stir and bustle of its streets, the shifting variety of its faces, the very tread of busy feet on its pavement, that brings his mind, as it were, to its proper bearings, causing him to appraise himself, his affairs, and his interests at their real value, and reminding him that any one individual, though the centre of his own circle, is but an insignificant unit in the great scheme.

Before John Roy had rattled through half a dozen streets, and shaved as many lamp-posts, in a hansom cab, he began to take a clearer view of his position, and to suspect that he might have been in a greater hurry than behoved a man of his experience, who had seen so much of life. It was unwise thus to jump, without inquiry, to conclusions. It would have been better to put his pride in his pocket, and get what information he could from the railway officials at his own station concerning his wife and her supposed travelling-companion, before he rushed up to London, breath-

ing blood and gunpowder, on an expedition that might turn out a fool's errand after all!

Such reflections came too late. He had arrived in town by the early train for a particular purpose, and he must carry it through. Obviously, the first thing to be done was to dress at an hotel and go down at once to his club.

Yet for all his knowledge of the world, it seemed strange to this man, whose mind was preoccupied with matters of life and death, that half a dozen acquaintances whom he had not seen for years should greet him, as if they were in the habit of meeting every day, with a careless nod and a growl at the east wind. Truly, your London welcome is the reverse of gushing, and an earthquake would hardly affect the well-bred placidity of St. James's Street if it took place east of Temple Bar.

Club usages and club manners are of themselves. In other phases of life men may seem pleased with the society of their friends, and even interested in their welfare; but as soon as they have passed the hall-porter and received their letters, such exuberance of natural feeling is at once discarded. As a huntsman puts on his kennel-coat when he goes amongst his hounds, so the members of these social institutions think well to clothe themselves from head to foot in an indifference which, but for its exceeding carelessness, would not be far removed from disgust.

Like most reserved people, John Roy was somewhat impressionable. It is not too much to say that he felt both discouraged and disheartened as, entering the morning-room of the Junior Amalgamated, he scanned nervously the array of hats and newspapers representing the members of that exclusive association. Where all faces were hidden it was

difficult to identify a friend, and his spirit sank while he reflected how severely he must put that friend's attachment to the test. Shy, awkward, and perplexed, he walked stiffly to the fireplace, feeling, like a thorough Englishman, that his present ordeal was the most unpleasant part of the whole business. A true Briton stands fire better than inspection, quailing pitifully before a battery that consists of impassible faces and calm, inquiring eyes.

On the hearthrug he brushed against a gentleman in an easy-chair, completely hidden behind the broad sheet of the *Times*. Turning to apologise, he found himself face to face, of all people in the world, with Lord Fitzowen.

It would feebly express John Roy's discomfiture to say you might have knocked him down with a feather. He stood with his mouth open in dumb surprise.

The other nodded, yawned, rose and stretched himself.

"How d'ye do, Roy?" said he. "Why didn't you come up yesterday with me and St. George there? I found him at the station. I suppose you won't go away again now. Have you brought Mrs. Roy?"

No man could put on this assumption of complete innocence had he been the cleverest actor that ever wore paint; besides, "St. George there," who was in the room, could have attested the veracity of Fitzowen's statement, and John Roy felt utterly at a loss. There was nothing for it but to regain his composure as best he might, and shake by the hand the man he had meant to shoot through the head, with such overdone cordiality as should serve to cover his own confusion.

"It's only a flying visit," he stammered. "Business, and that kind of thing. Going down again this evening. Town rather empty still. Nothing to keep one here just now."

"Nonsense! Stay till to-morrow. Dine with me quietly—*en garçon*. Nobody but St. George. I've a box at the Deucalion. We'll see the 'Ugly Duck.' It's rather a good burlesque, and bring What's-her-name back to supper. It wouldn't be bad fun."

Such evidence being circumstantial, and therefore of the best kind, became more conclusive with every word. It was beyond all bounds of probability that a gentleman who had run away with his friend's wife less than twenty-four hours ago, should be entertaining bachelors at dinner, asking actresses to supper, and otherwise partaking of those amusements on which feminine influence of any kind puts an immediate extinguisher; nor was it credible that he should calmly invite the injured husband to participate in such demonstrations of independence and self-government at a moment's notice, without any hesitation or embarrassment whatsoever. Again John Roy excused himself, though in his heart half tempted to accept, so completely had the atmosphere of London changed his sentiments in the space of two hours.

"I see," said Fitz, laughing good-humouredly; "Mrs. Roy won't stand it! Quite right. Give her my kind regards. After all, you have the best of it. There is something very superior and respectable in being a married man."

With whomsoever Nelly had run away, the culprit was clearly not Lord Fitzowen.

John Roy walked out of the Junior Amalgamated a good deal easier of mind than he

walked in; yet, strange to say, conscious that his displeasure against his wife was stronger now than while he believed her criminal conduct had estranged her from him for ever. She seemed a belligerent then, declaring open war, now she was only a vassal who had rebelled.

Turning matters over in his mind, he made sure she had taken refuge with her aunt. He would go to Corner Street at once, and bring her back, but in such a manner as to make her feel the whole weight of his dissatisfaction, and prevent her from ever having recourse to such refractory measures again.

He was soon at the Corner Hotel: it had never appeared so close, dirty, and uncomfortable before. Again came over him the unworthy feeling that he had descended too low in his choice, and that from the very beginning his marriage was a mistake.

This untoward mood seemed only aggravated by his reception. Mrs. Phipps, in the dingiest of caps, no sooner heard his name than she rushed at him open-armed, then curtseyed and looked foolish, seeing that he eluded her embrace.

This good lady's face was browner and more oblong than ever, her dress more faded, her forehead more shiny; her general appearance, he thought, had changed sadly for the worse.

"Why, you're quite a stranger, Mr. Roy," she exclaimed: "now do set down and rest yourself. You'll take a glass of wine, I hope. But first and foremost, how's Nelly? You've brought her with you, in course?"

He was taken aback, and looked it. "Nelly!" he repeated. "Is she not with *you*? I came here to look for her."

Mrs. Phipps dropped into an arm-chair, with a plump that spoke volumes for her confidence in its strength.

"You come here to look for her!" she gasped. "Oh, Mr. Roy, whatever do you mean?"

He was vexed beyond measure. "Mrs. Roy has chosen to leave her home, madam," he answered harshly, "and were she not dead to all proper feeling she would have come straight here. Had I found her under your protection, I might have been prevailed upon to look over such conduct in consideration of promised amendment for the future. But she has taken her own line, and I shall now feel justified in taking mine."

"Mr. Roy, you drove her to it!"

"I have no wish to exchange recriminations, Mrs. Phipps. If you choose to support your niece in her outrageous defiance of all social laws, of the customs, even the decencies of life, that is your affair. I shall decline to communicate with either of you, except through a solicitor."

"You drove her to it, Mr. Roy! If it was my last breath, I'd say it. When she left this house to get married—and a black day it seems to have been—there wasn't a better behaved young woman in all London than Nelly, nor a better principled, nor a better brought-up. There may be faults on both sides. I'm not a-going to say as there isn't. But when you come to leaving a home like yours, and going out alone into the wide world, nobody shall persuade me but what I told you before is gospel truth, and you drove her to it, Mr. Roy. You did, as sure as you stand there!"

Mrs. Phipps, who loved her niece, seemed a thorough woman, insensible to argument, but staunch in her affections. It was no use disputing

the point, and John Roy was forced to content himself with as dignified a retreat as could be made under the circumstances, for his hostess followed him, even to the street-door, with a volley of reproaches that gathered violence and incoherence at each successive discharge. The storm no doubt was succeeded by a torrent of tears, and the poor woman herself, in the midst of her dismay and anxiety, regretted bitterly that she had "spoke up," as she called it, with so much freedom, but her visitor had placed a quarter of a mile between them before this inevitable reaction, and it was too late to call him back.

He felt sadly perplexed. Nelly was gone, there could be no doubt, but where? If she had fled with Lord Fitzowen, he would have known how to act. If she had taken sanctuary in her aunt's hotel, he could have extricated her from that unsavoury refuge, with a certain loss of dignity, perhaps, but an undoubted accession of authority for the future. In either case his course would have been clear. But now she had baffled him completely. How could he return to Royston Grange without his wife? How reply to the inquiries of a whole neighbourhood that she had gone away from him, he didn't know where? He must have time for consideration; he ought not to be in a hurry; to-morrow or next day something might turn up. He had better stop in London, he thought, wishing heartily that he had never left it.

CHAPTER XVIII

DO YOU REMEMBER?

WHAT should he do with himself in the meantime? He looked at his watch: it was a little after four. The Academy had not yet opened, Hurlingham was too far off, Prince's was sure to be empty at this hour, and with the thermometer scarcely ten degrees above freezing, nobody would be in the Park. There was still a long blank to fill up before the earliest possible dinner, and the only choice of pastime lay between a visit to Christie and Manson's and a Turkish bath.

He had almost decided in favour of the latter when a Victoria pulled up with a jerk so close to the kerbstone that its stiff leathern wing brushed his elbow, while a lady bent on shopping, and enveloped in furs, landed on the pavement under his very nose.

"Good gracious, Mr. Roy!" exclaimed a voice that had haunted him for many a weary day since he heard it last, that he had not quite forgotten even now. "Is it you or your ghost? What ages since we met! I can't say how glad I am to see you again!"

It was Lady Jane, and nobody else! The Lady Jane of whom he had taken leave long years ago, under the elms in Kensington Gardens, with a few hurried words of sorrowing kindness and

"Good gracious Mr Roy"

goodwill, sorely curtailed because of that matron's proximity to whom Jane had been temporarily entrusted, and who "stood in" with the lovers, but only to a limited extent.

Now, the one was a prosperous widow, already out of black, the other a husband whom we may term unattached, smarting under a sense of conjugal ill-usage, and disposed to separate himself conclusively from his wife.

Lady Jane could not but feel gratified by the confusion of his manner while he returned her greeting. Though a woman's empire has been swept away ever so completely, she likes to think that its glories are not wholly forgotten. What is it all but a dream? an illusion, of which, perhaps, memory is the sweetest and most substantial charm!

"I—I hope you're quite well," stammered the gentleman; "I didn't know you were in town."

"How should you?" she answered kindly and with perfect self-possession. "It is a century since you and I have forgotten each other—or tried to, at anyrate."

The last very faintly, and with a downward look that used to be most effective. "When at close quarters, aim low," was her maxim, and Lady Jane's fire could do execution still.

"Do not say forgotten," he replied, trying to recover himself as behoved a man of the world. "It's not so very long, after all; and, to look at *you*, it seems as if we had been walking together only last week!"

"You always used to flatter one," she answered coquettishly. "Now, will you come and see me? Don't say no, for the sake of old times."

"When?"

"Any day. To-day, if you like. I am always in at five. I am on my way home now. Twenty-seven in the next street. I shall expect you in a quarter of an hour."

There were but a few minutes to talk, and they passed quickly enough. He walked like a man in a dream. He felt as if his Mexican life, his return home, his vegetation at Royston Grange, even his marriage to Miss Burton, were fancies of the sleeper that had disappeared with morning light. Yes, he was awake now, and nothing seemed real but Lady Jane.

Very real, too, and more substantial than of old. Face and figure were both rounder and fuller than when last they parted, all those years ago; but, like many English beauties, his first love's maturity was handsomer than her girlhood, and, had it been otherwise, what matter? The charm was in her eyes and voice still, it woke up feelings that had only slept while he believed them dead. John Roy began to think that, without knowing it, he might have been in love with two women at once all the time.

"Lady Jane at home?"

"Yes, sir," and mounting a dark staircase, pervaded by a heavy odour of hot-house plants, he found himself bowing over her ladyship's white hand, with more of deference and even devotion than is absolutely essential to politeness in a mere morning call.

But he began to talk about the weather, nevertheless, forgetting, in his perturbation, that when conversing with a lady it is only good manners, and saves a deal of trouble besides, to let her "make the running" from end to end.

She wasted little of her energies on the east

wind. Before his tea was cool enough to drink, she asked him pointedly whether he found her much altered, and wondered that he recognised her at once!

"I should have known you anywhere," he answered. "Do you think I forget so easily?"

The cream-jug in her hand shook a little, perhaps by accident.

"What is all one's life," she returned, "but trying to forget? It's the lesson everybody has to learn. I fancy it comes harder to women than men."

"You succeeded pretty easily. You didn't want much teaching — perhaps you've a natural talent independent of education."

"Why do you say that? It's unkind. If I wanted to be rude, I should say it's untrue. How can you tell what I have thought, or not thought, done, or not done, since — since we both were young and foolish? You've not taken much trouble to find out."

She had ingeniously turned the tables, and put him on his defence. He looked foolish, and replied vaguely, "Did you ever expect to see me again?"

"No. But I *hoped* it!"

"Lady Jane, were you *really* glad to meet me? Do you mean that you still — that you still"—

"Let me give you some more tea. No? Well, sit down again,—don't go away yet. I want you to tell me all about your wife."

His face fell, and he fidgeted in his chair. With a woman's tact she saw there was something wrong, and continued in the same easy, confidential tone—

"I was pleased — yes, I think I was *really*

pleased to hear of your marriage. I had a great mind to write and congratulate you."

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, there were reasons. If my poor husband had been alive I should have done it frankly enough. Matrimony is the best and happiest state for people, after all."

"I am glad you found it so. It is not everybody's experience. I am rather of Dr. Johnson's opinion, that marriages would turn out better if they were arranged by the Lord Chancellor."

"Mine *was*. At least, he could do nothing without his consent. My poor husband did not come of age till he was five-and-twenty. It made a great many complications, and at one time I very nearly changed my mind."

"But it answered? You were happy together, I suppose."

"We got on very well. Yes—I can't say it answered badly. He did everything I told—I mean, I asked him. Still, Mr. Roy, when people are to pass their whole lives together, it's a fearful risk. However little one expects, one is sure to be disappointed."

"But you married a man in your own station; that is a great point. You never could have borne with somebody you were ashamed of. Mr. de Banier came of a very old family, I believe?"

"Very. But—but his father was in trade all the same. No; I shouldn't say the De Baniers were exactly in our own set. Do you think that matters so much?"

"I think it is the most important consideration of all."

"What? more important than that people should like each other? You used not to be so

practical. Do you remember our argument on that very subject at Lady Yorkminster's ball?"

"Do *you*?"

"Every word of it. I could tell you the very names of the couples that passed us on their way to the tearoom. I could tell you the number of the dance we sat out. I believe I've got my card still. You had a white flower in your buttonhole, and I wondered whether it was given you by my cousin Blanche."

"What a memory you have! Is it of the head or the heart?"

"Nonsense. Tell me about yourself. When did you come to town? Where are you staying? I am dying to know Mrs. Roy."

He hesitated; but she looked so kind, so sympathising, and withal so handsome, that he took the plunge.

"Lady Jane," said he, "I don't mind your knowing the truth. The fact is, we—we—don't get on very well together, and Mrs. Roy is not with me at present."

She tried to seem sorrowful and commiserating, but there was a latent sparkle in her blue eyes, a something of satisfaction in her tone, while she answered, "I am so grieved to hear it. Don't you think, Mr. Roy, if you tried patience and kindness, she might be brought to reason? I can't understand anybody quarrelling with *you*!"

There is an *esprit de corps* in the sex which prompts every woman ostensibly to stand up for another. It takes but little persuasion, however, to satisfy her that the erring sister is wholly in the wrong.

"I have my faults," he answered, "but I don't think I am inclined to be hasty or unreasonable.

Lady Jane, I will trust you entirely, and I feel sure you will not abuse my confidence. In the first place, were you surprised to hear of my marriage?"

"A little. I thought—I thought—never mind what I thought."

"Well, it seems to be one's fate to make some great mistake in life sooner or later. I wonder whether the lady I chose was the least the sort of person you would have expected me to marry. I did a foolish thing, and now I have to pay for it."

Sympathy and curiosity, two very strong motives, prompted her ladyship to discharge a volley of inquiries, but she possessed a large share of that discretion which is only acquired in the uninterrupted training of society, and contented herself with a kindly glance and a sigh of commiseration.

"My wife," he continued, "though well-born and well-educated, is not—is not exactly one of the people you are accustomed to meet. In short, she don't quite understand the ways of society. You see, she has never lived much in the great world."

"Has she been presented at Court?" interrupted Lady Jane earnestly. "That is where the line should always be drawn. I heard she had *not*."

"Then you *did* hear about my marriage?"

"Of course. I was interested, and I asked. Can you wonder?"

"I never wonder. Still, there is such a thing as an agreeable surprise. I thought I had passed out of your life, and that even my name never came into your head."

"You thought nothing of the kind. Do you suppose a woman gives up her—her friendships in

that way, even under the hardest pressure, without scruple or regret? How little you understand us! Well, well—that's over and done with now! Let me hear all about it, Mr. Roy. Were you *very* much in love?"

"With Lady Jane? Yes; I am sure I told her so often enough."

"And she believed you. One need not be ashamed of the truth now. But you understand what I mean. Were you very much in love with your wife when you proposed to her—let me see, only the end of last summer? or was it one of those scrapes men get into from sheer laziness, and want of moral courage to say No?"

He had chivalry enough to scorn the loophole she left for his escape.

"Yes, I *was* in love with her," he answered rather sadly. "I thought she would have made me happy. Never mind, I can do without her. I dare-say it's all for the best."

"Poor Mr. Roy!" murmured her ladyship, "I am sorry. You know I am, don't you?"

"I know you have a kind and sympathising nature, Lady Jane," he answered, putting on his gloves as with intention of presently taking leave; "that is why I am inflicting my troubles on you now. It's not a long story, and I will begin at the beginning. Last summer I went to Beachmouth, simply because I was bored at home, meaning to have a dip in the sea, spend Sunday, and go back. Lady Jane, I stayed there three weeks."

"You found the Sundays so amusing, I conclude."

"Every day was a holiday. Each seemed brighter than the last. I never was so happy in my life. Never—but once."

"I am not going to ask you when that was. Go on."

"The very first evening I was struck by the appearance of a lady staying at the hotel; and next day, through the merest accident, I succeeded in making her acquaintance. I found her frank, pleasant, unaffected, and handsomer even than I thought."

"Dark or fair?"

"Dark, with beautiful black hair."

"How odd! you never used to admire dark women. Well, how long did this seaside romance go on before—excuse me, Mr. Roy—before you made a fool of yourself?"

"Not long. We met half a dozen times a day. I thought she seemed to like me, and soon hardened my heart to ask whether she really did or not. Then she told me all about herself, making no secret of her birth and bringing up. Her father was a bookseller, and her aunt kept an hotel."

"Mr. Roy, how could you?"

"I *could*, and I *did*. We were married in London, and I carried her off to Royston Grange, firmly persuaded that with a few hints, and a little practice among our country neighbours, she would make as good a lady as if she had been registered in the Stud-book—I beg your pardon, I mean the Peerage."

"They never do. You see, it didn't answer."

"That was no fault of mine. I took the greatest pains—explained everything, rehearsed everything. She wasn't obstinate, she wasn't exactly stupid; but somehow she seemed unable to take it in. After a time she lost her spirits, grew pale and silent; but declared there was nothing the matter, even while she looked up from her work with eyes full of tears."

"Poor thing! Perhaps she was unhappy."

"She *was* unhappy, Lady Jane, but not about *me*. Yesterday, at a moment's notice, she left her home during my absence, as far as I can learn, without a companion of any kind."

Lady Jane pondered. "Have you reason to suspect that she—that she cares for anybody in particular?"

"I had, and now I have *not*. I am puzzled—I am at my wits' end. She left no letter, no message. I am not even sure that she is in London. A man can't well advertise for his wife—can't have her cried like a lost dog. Lady Jane, what would you advise me to do?"

"Nothing!" answered her ladyship with decision. "That is always safe. Go about among your friends—show yourself everywhere. If people ask after Mrs. Roy, say you have come up to take a house, and she is to join you in London. Then they will insist on their own favourite situation, and that changes the subject. In the meantime confide in nobody but me. You may be sure I have your welfare at heart. When shall I see you again? Come and dine here to-morrow. My sister is in town; I'll ask her to meet you, and we will go to the French play. Good-bye, Mr. Roy, but not for quite so long as last time. To-morrow, at half-past seven. Don't forget."

He bent over the hand she gave him till his lips almost touched her rings, and walked downstairs, thinking the world a much better place to live in than it seemed an hour or two ago.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE WILDERNESS

LIKE Hagar in her banishment, Nelly felt utterly desolate and forlorn when she turned her back on the home that had once seemed such a paradise, in which but a few weeks ago she had promised herself long years of wedded happiness and love. Like Hagar, too, she was faint and weary from physical exhaustion. Mr. Roy's displeasure had taken away her appetite for breakfast, and she forgot all about luncheon, though it was ready on the table when she went away. It cost her a painful effort to preserve composure before the servants at the hall-door, and she parried with difficulty the curiosity of her maid, who could not understand why Mrs. Roy had packed a trunk with her own hands, or how that lady could possibly dispense with her ministrations for a single night.

At the station, too, where she arrived long before the train, her footman seemed exceedingly loath to be dismissed with the carriage as ordered, and proposed, though hardly in good faith, to return on foot the whole way, rather than not see Mrs. Roy's luggage into the guard's van with his own eyes. When these objections had been overruled, and the trot of the dear horses died out on the far high-road, our outcast felt very forlorn indeed. Behind her was the still fondly beloved

patriarch on whom she could not bear to think: before her a future too vague and gloomy to contemplate; while about her brooded the desolate silence of an unfrequented railway station.

Poor Hagar turned into the ladies' waiting-room to cry. No doubt it did her good, but looking in the glass over the fireplace she could not but observe that her eyes were swollen and her nose red.

Presently a spectral arm, shot out from the signal-post, denoted the arrival of her train. It was time to emerge and take a ticket. She shrank back to her hiding-place, nevertheless, in considerable vexation and dismay when she caught sight of Lord Fitzowen on the platform, laughing and talking with a young man of his own age, in dress, manners, and appearance an exact counterpart of himself.

"Of all people on earth," thought Nelly, "this is the last I wanted to meet. How can I explain to him why I am here and where I am going? Besides, I look perfectly hideous. He is sure to see I have been crying. Good gracious! if he was to ask me the reason, and I couldn't keep from bursting out again! What would his friend think? What would he think himself? No. Here I shall stay till I've seen them safe off. After all that has passed, rather than travel by the same train with Lord Fitzowen, perhaps in the same carriage, I would never go near London again!"

So she flattened her face against the window, and watched the two gentlemen into a first-class compartment labelled "Smoking" with eager eyes and a beating heart, waiting, impatiently enough, till the train panted on and disappeared.

Then she drank some water from a dusty carafe,

sat down, and collected her energies to think out the whole situation. Once, in momentary weakness, she half resolved to walk back on foot to Royston Grange and be reconciled with its master; but her heart was still too sore, and she dismissed the idea almost as soon as it arose.

Consulting a time-table, aided by a sympathising railway porter, she made up her mind to go down the line to a certain junction some thirty miles distant, where she could meet a late express that, from inability to keep its time, was called in contumely The Flying Dutchman, and so proceeding to London, arrive there in the middle of the night; but this intricate plan of operations she was unable to carry out. At the hour when she should have been taking her seat in The Dutchman she was in bed at an hotel, where she had resorted to get some tea, with a headache that incapacitated her from standing or even sitting upright.

"What does it matter?" thought poor Nelly. "Nobody expects me; nobody cares if I am alive or dead! Auntie has got accustomed to do without me, and nothing would please Mr. Roy better than to be quite sure he would never hear of me again."

She did them both injustice. Mr. Roy was seeking her in London before her headache allowed her to get out of bed; and when, on the second day after her departure from Royston Grange, she arrived at the Corner Hotel, it needed but one look in her relative's face to be assured of auntie's overpowering anxiety and her delight at the wanderer's return.

"So he came *here* to find me?" repeated Nelly for the twentieth time, when she had taken her bonnet off and settled down in her own old place.

"Did he look disappointed? Did he seem sorry, auntie, or what?"

"Sorry?" returned Mrs. Phipps—a practical person, who calls spades and everything else by their right names. "Not a bit! Angry, if you like. There was a precious blow-up, I can tell you. I gave him a piece of my mind, and he went away in a huff."

"He'll come again," said Nelly. "He must, if he's in earnest. Don't you think, auntie, he is sure to come again?"

"I hope not," replied her aunt. "You're better without him, my dear. I never thought much of them consequential, stuck-up ways of his. When he made you a lady, why didn't he treat you as such? No, no; you're better without him, Nelly, depend upon it. You've got a comfortable home here as long as you like to stay, and, for my part, I hope he will never darken our doors again."

Nelly did not quite agree, yet she often asked herself how she would decide if her husband were to propose that she should come back and live with him once more. Hurt, vexed, humiliated, she could yet have forgiven him only too readily; but, because she loved him so dearly, it seemed better that she should never see him again. As the nightingale is said to lean her breast against a thorn; as the horse, most assuredly, in his gallant, generous nature, presses down and crouches on the stake that drains his life-blood away—so does woman seem to derive some mysterious and morbid gratification while hugging her keenest sorrows tight to her bosom, and immolating herself at the altar of an unworthy idol, that looks down on the sacrifice calm, pitiless, and imperturbable, with a stony smile. But whatever might have been her decision, she

would have liked at least the option of refusing. And day by day Nelly's step became heavier, the colour faded from her cheek, as visitor after visitor poured into the hotel, but no Mr. Roy.

He was differently employed. Putting off from week to week his intention of going back, he left Mrs. Mopus, much to her contentment, in sole command at Royston Grange, while he amused himself with the gaieties of early spring in London and devoted his spare time to the dangerous society of Lady Jane.

It was not long before people began to talk. "So sorry we could not come to you, my dear; we dined with Lady Jane de Banier. Who had you? Mr. Roy, of course! It's really getting too barefaced. She has not been a widow eighteen months, and there she is, flaunting about in colours, and I don't know what all, with a married man! It's true, my dear, I assure you. There's a wife hidden away somewhere in the country. Lord Fitzowen has seen her, and declares she is perfectly beautiful. Jane ought really to be spoken to. One *must* draw a line; and if nobody else has courage to give her a hint, I will do it myself."

So Jane *was* spoken to, with the usual result. She resented such interference warmly, and became only the more engrossed with her present fancy that it was represented as injurious to the future of her children, and hazardous to her own good name. "I suppose you would have me go about in a *yashmak*, with a guard of what-d'you-call-'ems," protested her ladyship, tossing her head in high dudgeon. "Thank you, I'd rather not! I am a Christian woman in a Christian country, and I think I am the best judge of my own conduct."

Then she had a quiet little cry, and sat down to

write an incoherent note to Mr. Roy, entreating him not to come near her again, which brought him to her door in a violent hurry within half an hour of its delivery.

It must be admitted, however, that although her friends expressed great dissatisfaction among themselves, they dined with her readily enough, notwithstanding the obnoxious Mr. Roy, issuing their own invitations to the imprudent couple freely in return, so as to afford them every opportunity of meeting at home and abroad.

Ere long the one was never asked to anything without the other, and an easy-going world made up its mind to recognise this indiscreet renewal of former intimacy as "an established thing."

Society has compiled a code of its own for which it is answerable to itself, and has ruled that "one person may steal a horse while another must not look at a halter." The principle is sufficiently elastic, and it has been so liberally extended of late that the horse-stealers are increasing every day. I do not mean to infer Lady Jane was one of these. Her conduct, though imprudent, originated in the only natural and healthy impulse of her artificial life. In girlhood she had liked John Roy honestly enough—had loved him, indeed, in so far as she was capable of that unworldly sentiment. She gave him up perhaps too readily, but who knows what amount of pressure was put on her in her own family? The female department has its secrets in the households of Mayfair as of Stamboul. I daresay she often lay awake crying, and envied the sweeps or the milkman when her mamma thought she was sound asleep. I daresay, while she stood at the altar in that love of a wedding-dress (*corsage Louis Quatorze*), she glanced

approvingly at her bridegroom, who was as spruce as a new pin, and admitted that she liked him better than anybody in the world—"bar one!"

So she made Mr. de Banier a good wife enough, managing his house, ordering his dinner, and contradicting him no more than was absolutely necessary before his servants or his guests. She nursed him, too, kindly and tenderly through his last illness, and, perhaps, never felt so attached to him in her life as the day the doctor gave him over.

For weeks after the funeral she refused to see a soul, going softly about the house with a pale face and red eyes; so that the very maids declared they "never thought her ladyship had been one to take on like that!" And she put up a monument to his memory, unequalled in hideousness, that cost the best part of a thousand pounds.

When she found herself a rich widow, still handsome, in the prime of life, was she to be wholly debarred from those pleasures of the heart she had given up so dutifully to obey papa and mamma? Lady Jane thought not. She saw men in society every day on whom she might have set her affections with the certainty of a return; but she had always been fastidious, and now seemed more than ever hard to please. This one was vulgar, the other overbearing, a third hunted, a fourth smoked, and the vacant situation had not yet been filled on the afternoon when she went out shopping in her Victoria and met Mr. Roy.

She experienced a want in life which the society of her children—two slips of girls and a fat-headed little boy—proved quite inadequate to supply. There are women for whom the interests of a nursery can be the end and aim of existence; but

Lady Jane, though a kind, even an indulgent mother, was not one of these. She had dreamed her dreams, as the most practical of us will; had even imagined an ideal of her own, an impossible person, full of antagonistic qualities, good and bad; which misty phantom she dressed in the remnants of her old, worn-out attachment, and believed that it reminded her of Mr. Roy—was it likely that she should let him go, when he came once more within range of her attractions,—a lonely man, ill-used, disappointed, with a history, and, perhaps, none the less desirable that he hung just out of reach and was not exactly free?

I am a little surprised, for one, that she should have asked him to tea, and then to dinner, and afterwards to come and see her whenever he liked. Finally, that she made her servants understand she was always at home to Mr. Roy, and to nobody else when he called.

"Love is of man's life a thing apart," says Byron. I fear that with the ruder and less sensitive half of our species, this delightful fallacy requires certain favourable conditions, both of body and mind, to become the one engrossing occupation of both. Love-in-idleness, however, is a plant that needs but little care or culture to arrive at rich maturity. Like the young trees of the thrifty Scotsman, it is growing while we are sleeping; and a man who has nothing to do finds plenty of time for folly when the occasion offers.

John Roy, neglecting his duties as a country gentleman and landowner, living vaguely from hand to mouth, as it were, at a London hotel, undecided how to act, with no certain task for to-day, no definite intentions for to-morrow, was of all people in the world the most likely to drift into

some egregious absurdity, from a mere sense of helplessness and discouragement, a morbid conviction that it was impossible for him to keep straight; and even if he did, by painful self-denial, succeed in following the right road after all, what was the good?

But he was by no means happy; his self-love had been grievously wounded; and Lady Jane's continued preference, however flattering, could not heal the sore. It was pleasant, no doubt, and not very expensive, to send her bouquets, and paper-cutters, and stalls at the French play. He experienced a certain excitement in watching for her appearance at a party, in catching her eye across a room, with the consciousness that there was a something between them in which the bystanders had no share; and in putting her affectionately into her carriage when she went away. Still, there was also a sense of sameness about the whole affair,—he was going over the old ground that had been traversed often enough before; and a path even of roses may become wearisome when it has to be trodden again and again. We catch ourselves saying precisely the same things to Mary that we said to Jane; Susan's pressure of the hand is exactly like poor Henrietta's; and how can we send cut flowers to Margaret without repeating the message that used to be forwarded with her posies to Kate? Sometimes he admitted that, even if he *had* married Lady Jane, he might have got tired of her. Did he ever feel tired of Nelly? No! a thousand times no! Annoyed, irritated, provoked, fancying he wished he had never seen her—but weary of her, certainly not. In his married life there had been nothing irksome, nothing out of character, nothing of that

continued sense of effort which is so exhausting to a man in a false position, and which made him feel something akin to relief, rather than disappointment, on those rare occasions when he passed an afternoon without dancing attendance on Lady Jane.

How could he be happy while continually at war with himself? Now he would seek Nelly out, no matter where she was hiding, humble himself at her feet, and entreat her to return to a home that should never be entered but by their own two selves. Anon he resolved to take legal measures for a separation,—nay, move heaven and earth for a divorce, that he might put an end to this unsatisfactory state of things by a marriage with Lady Jane. And still he lived on from day to day, settling nothing, doing nothing, alternately making and breaking resolutions of amendment, but calling, nevertheless, at No. 27 as persistently and nearly as often as the penny post.

CHAPTER XX

A BLUE-JACKET

IN the meantime Nelly settled down to her former habits at the Corner Hotel, much to the gain of that establishment in matters of cleanliness and comfort. Mrs. Phipps, who had missed her sadly, while protesting against her own selfishness, could not but rejoice to have her back, estimating at its real value her niece's supervision of a continually changing household. Mrs. Roy, who now chose to call herself Mrs. John, as a compromise between the assertions of a married woman's dignity and the independence of an *alias*, resumed without a murmur the old leathern stool on its three high legs, the folio volumes ruled in red ink, the long quills, the bunches of keys, and other appliances of that authority which was exercised from her seat of government, a glass cage off the entrance-hall, secluded from the light of day.

Servants and tradespeople saw little difference in her demeanour. Punctual, exact, methodical, always decided, while always courteous, she might be graver in manner and slower in gesture than of old, but that was all. "Mrs. John had known trouble," they observed, "along of a good-for-nothing 'usband." Such a calamity, being in no way remarkable, demanded little pity and less surprise. Only her aunt looked below the surface.

Mrs. Phipps, vexed and saddened, told herself that Nelly was breaking her heart for an unworthy object, as she phrased it, "out of sheer nonsensical trumpery and trash."

It was not long before the good woman boiled over and spoke out.

"You'll do yourself a mischief, my dear," she expostulated when, coming down to breakfast earlier than usual one morning, she found Nelly reading the Bible, bathed in tears. "I wonder as you haven't more pride, I do. If it was me, I'd never so much as waste a thought on a man who could conduct himself like Mr. Roy, except to thank my stars I was well rid of him. I've no patience with you, nor him neither. A haughty, arbitrary, unfeeling, unprincipled Herod! That's what he is, and I wish he may be punished *like* Herod, and worse!"

"Why should you blame him, auntie," answered Nelly, "if I don't? Didn't he come here after me, and couldn't I go back to him any moment if I chose? But I *don't* choose. It would only be misery for him and for me. Think what a dreadful thing for a man to be ashamed of his wife!"

"Ashamed, Nelly! How can you speak so random? There's shame enough, I'll not deny it, but none on *our* side. In my opinion, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the Queen, or the Lord Mayor, or somebody should have the power of undoing such a marriage as yours, just as if you had never been asked in church at all."

"Suppose I don't wish it undone?"

"Suppose the moon was made of green cheese! You ought to wish it, you ought to insist on it; and if I had to pay twenty lawyers twenty times over, I'd spend my last shilling, but I'd see you

righted. You've no spirit, Nelly; no more hadn't your poor mother. I only wish it was *me*. If they could keep me down like that, I'd let 'em."

"It's no use worrying, auntie. People think so different. Why are both of us to be miserable? Surely one's enough. I daresay I expected too much. I have been disappointed, and must bear it the best I can. I've always got *you* left, and a happy home here, haven't I, as long as I like?"

"Happy home, indeed! Yes, it *was* a happy home before I let you go to that sinful place Beachmouth, and I wish the sea would rise to-night and wash clean over it, I do! Forgive and forget, says they, but I am one of them that can't forgive, and won't, even though I might forget. Nelly, Nelly, how can you look me in the face and mention the word *happy*, with your eyes as red as a chimney-sweep's, and all your beautiful colour gone?"

"Nobody is quite unhappy who is doing right, auntie. I may be a little low, and out of spirits now, I don't deny it; but perhaps it's my own fault, thinking too much of things that cannot be helped. It will wear off after a time. Don't distress yourself about me. And, auntie dear, if Mr. Roy *should* come and ask to see us, don't you fly in his face and be so short with him as you were last time, for my sake."

"Why, Nelly, you are not going to say you'd go back?"

"No, dear. I hardly think I should if he asked me ever so. But we won't speak of that. Who can tell what is going to happen, or where we may all be this day week? I don't care to look forward much. I'm quite content to stay as I am; only, if you see me rather down sometimes, don't you take

notice. I'm such a silly that a word of kindness sets me off crying in a moment, and I can't stop."

"Crying, indeed!" concluded Mrs. Phipps; "I'd set some folks crying to a pretty tune if I had my way. There, Nelly, you could always coax your old aunt to do whatever you asked, from the time you was in short frocks. I'll say no more; and if I could only see you look a little brighter, with a bit of colour in your cheek, there wouldn't be a happier woman than me between here and St. Paul's!"

So the good lady retired to the basement, where she could forget her vexation among those domestic implements she delighted to see in use; while Nelly ruled another column in the ledger, and made out their week's bill for a family on the second floor, with unfailing accuracy of mind and finger, but with a heavy heart longing to be far away.

"Quite a superior person that Mrs. John," said the ostensible head of the family on the second floor to its actual ruler — "so quiet, so ladylike, and—handsome, I should say, my dear; shouldn't you?"

"I hardly looked at her," replied his wife, whose feminine eye had scanned every feature of Nelly's face, every article of her clothing, with critical inspection. "Possibly she may be attractive to people who admire that style. I confess I cannot interest myself about a barmaid!"

"Of course not, my dear," was the meek rejoinder, equally sincere. "I only caught a glimpse of her by accident. I daresay I was mistaken. Can I do anything for you in the Haymarket? I thought of going as far as the Club."

Must I admit that he lingered in the passage, asking for letters he had no reason to expect, so as to have another look at Mrs. John, if only through the blurred and dingy panes of her glass cage?

Nor was this worthy gentleman, a roundabout person of mature age, under strict control of his wife, the only visitor who appreciated her attractions. Every stranger of the male sex coming to engage rooms, whether he went away disappointed or remained rejoicing, paid his tribute of respectful tones and admiring glances to the pale, sad, handsome woman who seemed to superintend this establishment. Friends of Mrs. Phipps, suddenly remembering they had been shamefully negligent, began to make afternoon calls with increasing frequency, lingering and loitering in hopes of being invited to tea, until some of the more persistent discovered that the aunt presided alone over this agreeable refreshment, and the niece was satisfied with a solitary cup and plate in her glass house. She kept them at a distance all alike, and if not unconscious of their admiration, accepted it with calm disgust, as a necessary adjunct to the situation, like blacks in a milk-jug or beetles on the kitchen floor.

So the weeks dragged on. Easter set in, as usual, with sleet and snow; the sweeps were too cold to dance with any attempt at merriment on May-day; and Her Majesty's drawing-room was held in a pouring rain, that ladies clothed in virtue and loyalty, but otherwise most insufficiently clad, only hoped might be the forerunner of a thaw.

Everything seemed dismal enough. Tradesmen "supposed we should have a dull season," there was no news at the clubs, and those who make dinner-conversation asserted incredible

"What Cheer, Mr Brail".

statistics of houses to let and coachmen out of place.

But people thronged into town, nevertheless. The authorities seized this opportunity to pick up the principal thoroughfares, so that London, in its main streets, became impassable for many hours of the day. Only by exercise of exceeding patience and dexterity could the driver of a four-wheeled cab thread his way along the Strand, and when one of these vehicles stopped at the door of the Corner Hotel, Corner Street, the cabman grinned his thanks for an extra shilling, as having obeyed his fare's injunctions to "steer small."

Mrs. Phipps happened to meet this fresh arrival in the entrance. At the first glance she made a bounce that seemed to lift her a foot from the ground, and it is no reflection on her sense of propriety to affirm that she resisted with difficulty a strong impulse to fling her arms round his neck and hug him to her breast.

"What cheer, Mr. Brail?" she exclaimed, between laughing and crying, in the exuberance of her welcome. "What cheer? as you taught us to say before you sailed; and now I can't believe my eyes to see you back, and you looking so well and hearty, not a pin the worse!"

"The worse!" he repeated, taking both her hands; "why should I be the worse? Such a welcome as a man seems to get from all hands when he sets his foot on shore might bring him into port again though he had cleared out for the other world. England, home, and beauty, Mrs. Phipps—that's the ticket! *This* is home, and *you* are beauty. Now, can you give me a bed?"

"Ah! you're the same man still! I'm sure I wonder how you keep your head on without some-

body to hold it down! It wouldn't have been *you*, of course, to have thought of writing beforehand."

"I knew you would like a pleasant surprise, my dear lady. I must have a bed here in the old shop, and that's all about it!"

She looked affectionately in his frank, open face, tanned by exposure to the colour of mahogany, contrasting well with his short, crisp, light-brown hair, bearing sailor written on every line, and in thorough keeping with his square, sinewy figure, his loose, powerful limbs.

"I'm full," she said, "up to the attics. I sent away a French family not an hour ago, but I would rather turn out myself, and sleep on the kitchen-dresser, than not make room for *you*. Where is your luggage — your traps, as you call them? Leave them there in the passage, while I go and ask Nelly what's to be done."

"Nelly! Miss Burton! Is she here still? Not spliced yet, nor *you* neither, Mrs. Phipps! That's even more extraordinary! If I'd known you were going to keep single for my sake, I would never have stayed away all this time, cruising after the North Pole!"

"Go along with you!" she answered, pushing him into her sitting-room. "You're no better than you always was, and you'll never mend your ways now; but bad as you are, I've lain awake many a stormy night thinking of you, and I am more than pleased, young man, I am humbly thankful, to see you back at home once more!"

Collingwood Brail, Esq., Lieutentant in the Royal Navy, lately of Her Majesty's ship *Aurora*, paid off after the Arctic Expedition, had frequented this Corner Street Hotel since the time when he used to run up from Portsmouth on a week's leave,

as mischievous a midshipman as ever nibbled a biscuit, or cut a brother reefer's hammock down by the head. His frank, boyish manners and kindly disposition wound themselves round the heart of his landlady, who darned his stockings, mended his shirts, and overhauled his kit generally on so many occasions that she began to consider him almost as a son. Once when, after a long stare at the monument to Sir John Franklin near the Duke of York's column, he found his pocket picked of every shilling he possessed, she insisted on keeping him till his leave expired, without sending in her bill, and then lent him a five-pound note to take him back to his ship. She was fond of relating how, in process of time, he returned the amount of his debt in full, not forgetting gratuities to the servants, by the hand of a staid messmate, who did not conceal, perhaps, that the scraping of such a sum together out of daily pay was indeed, as young Brail described it, "a tight fit." After he was "made" he wrote to her from the *Tagus*,—she had not an idea where it was, but prized her ship-letter all the more, producing it with great importance at tea-parties and such occasions of festivity, where it formed the principal topic of conversation.

"It's not out of sight out of mind with the blue-jackets," she would say, wiping her eyes; "and the warmest hearts you will find in this world of ours, take my word for it, are the hearts of oak!"

Many a time when a gale of wind swept over London, bringing showers of soot and dirt, with here and there a chimney-pot crashing into the street, her blood ran cold to realise the dangers her young sailor-friend must encounter ten thousand

miles off, where, perhaps, he was pacing the deck impatient, in a dead calm, whistling for the breeze.

She could never be brought to understand this, entertaining a profound conviction that day and night a seaman was always battling for life, and regarded every member of the profession as a hero and martyr, with a turn for conviviality and light comedy that rendered him the pleasantest companion in the world.

Next to her niece there was nobody for whom she entertained so strong a personal regard as Collingwood Brail.

And the man deserved it. Every inch of him was gentleman and sailor—the finest combination in the world. Plain and downright in conversation, but of a pleasant good-nature that made it impossible to be rude, he would differ with you frankly, but never put you in the wrong; utterly devoid of affectation in dress, manner, and sentiments, he was scrupulously courteous and polite, without yielding a jot of his own independence or self-respect. Exceedingly deferential to women, he did not seem to infer that they belonged to a different order of beings either above or below his own, and to offend one by word or deed would have appeared to him no less unmanly than to hurt a child. As in person he was strong without being clumsy, active without being restless; so, morally, he possessed good sense without pomposity, and courage without bravado.

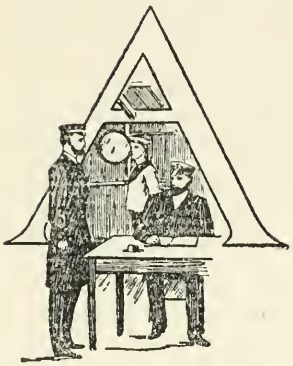
Then, besides these solid qualities, Mr. Brail had a hundred trifling accomplishments, due to his nautical training, invaluable in social life. Nobody organised a picnic, even to the tying up of the hampers, with such facility and such success. It seemed as if he could turn his hand to anything,

whether it were picketing the horses, lighting a fire in the copsewood, or washing plates and dishes when all was done, and he had danced a hornpipe in and out the crockery without damage to a single article. In a country-house, too, he was never late for breakfast, never sleepy at night, dressed quicker, and turned out neater, than any dandy in the company; shot well if he was asked, fished if they wanted him, rode to hounds with unbounded nerve, if little judgment, and under any conditions would have thought it as disgraceful to confess he was a pickpocket as to admit he was bored!

With the success he achieved in his own profession we have nothing to do, but it is easy to understand how such a character would be welcome everywhere to men, and exceedingly popular with women. When Mr. Brail paid one of his visits to Corner Street as a lieutenant of a year's standing, he found no difficulty in obtaining his share of those gaieties which are supposed to enliven the London season. It was at a flower-show in the Horticultural Gardens that our light-hearted sailor lost his liberty for good in a casual introduction to Miss Bruce. Never before had he found himself unequal to such social occasions, or utterly undone and consumed by a pair of bright eyes that only meant to enliven and to warm. It was all up with him in less than ten minutes. A handsome girl bending over the azaleas, a crafty old lady enjoying his discomfiture, an introduction, a bow, a walk to the next tent, and he was a free man no longer. To use his own words, "He hauled down his colours at the first shot, and for that kind of service never had the heart to hoist them again!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM



A LIEUTENANT in the Royal Navy, by no means laid on the shelf, could have but few opportunities of ingratiating himself with a young lady in that class for which the amusements of a London season constitute the great business of life during four months of every year. The fact of her being an heiress and only daughter seemed but to place her more completely out of reach; and Collingwood Brail, walking pensively home to Corner Street, had the good sense to tell himself that, for all its romance, this late vision of love in the azaleas must henceforth be looked back to as a dream.

The image of that handsome high-bred girl in her light summer dress, herself so like a flower, would haunt him for years. That could not be helped. He would think of her when he walked the deck, keeping his watches in the golden tropical nights, while topsails and courses were bleached in the moonlight, and the ship almost steered herself, smooth and easy, on an even keel.

Yes, there could be no harm in thinking of her at all times and seasons, in harbour or at sea, always the last thing before going to sleep when he turned in. She would never know it. What matter? A man must do his duty according to his rating, fore and aft, below and aloft. It was no use whining! As for getting spliced to such an angel, he might as well expect to be a rear-admiral in next week's *Gazette.* No; he must stick to his profession, and make up his mind not to see Miss Bruce again.

But on his table lay a smooth, glazed card, such as he disrespectfully termed an "invite to a hop," setting forth, in polite language, that Mrs. Lightfoot would be at home the same evening at ten o'clock, with the word "dancing" added in fine Italian characters, lest visitors should be taken unawares. He had no earthly reason to suppose that this hospitable lady numbered Miss Bruce among her acquaintance; but, after "holding on," as he called it, in profound reflection for five minutes, he rang the bell, ordered his pumps to be polished up to the nines, and hardened his heart to go.

Mrs. Phipps, who had herself starched and folded his white neckcloth, inspected him critically before she let him out, observing, with her usual freedom, that "if the young ladies didn't flock round this handsome sailor, like flies to a jampot, they was a good deal changed since *her* day, and changed, moreover, for the worse!"

Fortune, while captious and uncertain, is so far a woman that she favours those who trust her without reserve. Before young Brail had been five minutes in the dancing-room, Miss Bruce entered it with her chaperon, and, to the credit of our blue-jacket be it said that he hesitated not

one moment, but, like the gallant tar immortalised in verse—

> He stepped up unto her, and made a congee,
> And axed of her pardon, for makin' of so free :

leading her off in triumph to a quadrille, which, on first acquaintance, is perhaps a more eligible dance than a waltz.

Modest and unassuming, Collingwood Brail was by no means shy. Like most of his profession, he had plenty of self-confidence, of self-consciousness none at all. Miss Bruce, rather tired of the conventional dandy, who may or may not be amusing, but is invariably egotistical, found her new admirer a most agreeable partner ; so much so that she consented to accompany him to the tearoom, unconsciously riveting his fetters with the slim white hand she ungloved, while giving him a bunch of film and gossamer, that represented fan and handkerchief, to hold in his own. These little graces completely finished him. She had made him fast now with a double turn, and from that moment Mrs. Lightfoot's ball, its lustres, music, and decorations, with all his other partners, ceased to have any intrinsic value whatever, rendered precious only as contributing to the greater glorification of Miss Bruce.

She danced with him once more after supper, and in that blissful measure he contrived to make himself acquainted with her tastes and usual haunts ; but his leave was nearly out, and he only met her again, by one of those accidents which happen so often, at the Royal Academy, after pervading that exhibition for three mortal hours, till his head swam and his eyes ached, while hat and boots felt so tight he could hardly bear to keep them on. Here she

She gave him a moment of
intense happiness

gave him a moment of intense happiness by stopping before a sea-piece, ordering him to explain its details, and professing an interest in everything pertaining to ships or sailors that set his pulses tingling with delight. Such confidential interviews fleet only too fast, but he managed to hint that those who went to sea carried with them many sweet memories from the shore; and though she looked down and made no answer, she seemed to think they left behind them pleasing recollections in their turn.

While he walked along Piccadilly he felt as if he had hazarded a declaration in form; but catching sight of her sweet face half an hour later, in an open carriage bowling through the Park, a chill crept round his heart with the conviction that after all they lived in separate worlds, and that when out of sight he was no more to her than the crossing-sweeper in the street.

There are hot and cold fits in these maladies both equally unreasonable. It is strange that the more experience men acquire in such matters, the less subject are they to attacks of diffidence and despondency, estimating their chances of winning in an inverse ratio to their own value and appreciation of the prize. In the first flush of manhood they believe no woman thinks them worth looking at; in the decline of middle age they fancy themselves objects of interest and admiration to all. My own observation leads me to conclude that in love-making, as in other hazardous amusements, confidence is a prime element of success. A rider should leap without misgiving to the saddle, a swimmer trust himself fearlessly to the wave; and he who would advance in the good graces of a lady, old or young, must be persuaded of his eventual

success—above all, must spare her the exertion of meeting him half-way. However premature the advances of an admirer, no woman is quite taken so much by surprise as she would have him think.

But Mr. Brail's captain was one of those smart officers who insist on the duty being done; and within twenty-four hours of our young lieutenant's visit to the Academy he had touched his hat to Her Majesty's quarter-deck, and reported himself come on board, with little chance of setting foot on English ground again till the ship was paid off. He might not have revisited London during the whole time she remained in commission, but that he was allowed to volunteer for the Arctic Expedition; and on being transferred to the *Aurora*, made another trip to the metropolis for completion of his kit. Of course he put up in Corner Street, and equally of course he so disposed his leisure as to meet Miss Bruce more than once, perhaps two or three times, always in rooms full of people, and vigilantly guarded by her friends. It was love-making under difficulties, I admit. "A cat," they say, "may look at a king," but she must not stare too often or too long: and poor pussy would soon be made to know her place if her eyes expressed half the affectionate admiration she felt. I protest these two young people never exchanged a word that might not have been entered on the ship's log, and yet each was conscious of some mysterious interest in common, some vague and delightful illusion shared by the other, and forming the happiness of both.

Once he plucked up courage to ask for a flower —forty people were looking on—and she refused. "I should like to give you something better," she murmured, with a glance over her bouquet that

was well worth all the posies ever gathered in a garden! and from that moment a faint ray of hope began to tremble in the darkness, like the false dawn he had so often welcomed in his morning watch, because he knew it was a sure forerunner of day. Their farewell, half an hour later, sounded common-place enough.

"Good-bye, Miss Bruce! I shall not see you again before I sail."

"No, indeed! I am so sorry for you, Mr. Brail! How cold you will be! Good-bye!"

But, cold as it was in latitude 84°, he contrived to keep that farewell warm in his heart because of the wistful look that accompanied it, and a little tremble in its accents detected by no ear but his own.

And now he was back in England, hearty, safe, and warm, pointed at wherever he went as one of a handful of heroes, proudly conscious that he had done his duty, and delighted to look in the homely, honest face of his hostess once again.

"So you come to see me *first*!" said Mrs. Phipps in a tone of exceeding triumph, when she had pushed her visitor by main force into her own particular chair. "Not before your mother?—now don't say it. I know you better than that."

"My mother was on the jetty when I came ashore," he answered, laughing. "I had the greatest difficulty in preventing her from treating the boat's crew with new rum, and making every man-jack of them beastly drunk!"

"Have you brought her to London? Why didn't she come here?"

"Because I left her at home. I am going back in a day or two, but I was bound to get to London at once. I didn't even go round by Nether

Warden to see the old ladies, I was in such a precious hurry to shake you by the hand."

Mrs. Phipps wiped her eyes. So conclusive a mark of friendship could not but be gratifying, and no doubt the lieutenant was sincere, not in the least suspecting that he hankered after London because he learned from his aunt's letters that the usual inmates of Warden Towers had gone to town for the season.

"You'll take some tea, my dear?" continued Mrs. Phipps, full of affectionate hospitality. "It will be made directly the kettle boils. Nelly! Nelly!" she continued, throwing up the window of the glass case in which Mrs. John sat over her accounts, "you're wanted in the parlour this minute. Never mind the washing-book just now. Here's somebody come to see you that's dropped from the clouds!"

Mrs. John's heart made a great jump, and then stood still. She was white to the lips as she emerged from her hiding-place, and her knees so shook she could with difficulty stand upright. It was wonderful how quickly she recovered her composure when, on entering her aunt's sitting-room, the Arctic navigator grasped her cordially by the hand. Even to herself the greeting she offered seemed cold and restrained. It needed a strong effort to conceal her disappointment and infuse a little heartiness into her tone.

She had expected something so different!—a sad, forgiving face, loving, reproachful, yet more in sorrow than in anger, and a husband's arms open to take her back in silent welcome to his heart and home.

The sailor only thought she looked worn, worried, and in weak health, attributing her pale

cheeks to a London atmosphere, and deciding that she wanted nothing to set her up again but a good long cruise in the country for change of air.

"Why, Miss Burton!" he exclaimed, with friendly interest and concern, "you've not been ill, have you? Handsome you always were, and always will be, but, my dear young lady, what have you done to lose all your roses since I saw you last?"

"You must not call me Miss Burton," she replied, with the ghost of a smile. "I go by the name of John now—Mrs. John. Do you think it pretty? Hasn't auntie told you I've got married while you were at sea?"

"Married!" he repeated. "Spliced! You take away my breath! And yet," he added gallantly, "I don't know why I should be surprised, except at your finding anybody good enough. Well, I hope you are very happy, and I'm sure I wish you joy with all my heart!"

He took both her hands, and wondered to feel them lie so cold and listless in his own.

Nelly had plenty of courage. Her frank, open disposition made her only too ready to take the bull by the horns, and it was her nature to trust a friend without reserve.

"Mr. Brail," said she, "joy does not come by wishing, and whether it's our own fault or not, very few of us seem meant to be happy in this world. I am married, as I told you. I can't bring myself to wish it undone, and yet I know it would have been better to remain as I was. I had rather hear your adventures than talk of myself. Now sit down again in that easy-chair, till aunt comes back with the tea, and tell me about the North Pole—wasn't it very cold?"

He could not help laughing. "Cold! yes, of

course it was cold, else there wouldn't be such a lot of ice. It's very odd, since I came ashore everybody has asked me the same question. I feel sure my aunts will want to know if I wore flannel next my skin, and had my bed warmed every night! Cold and lime-juice, lime-juice and cold, that's all a landsman can make of the expedition. Good things in their way, but a man may have a surfeit of both."

"We heard you had too much of one and too little of the other," said Nelly, who sometimes read a morning paper; chiefly, I believe, to see if Mr. Roy was mentioned in the fashionable intelligence.

"Ah! now you want me to tell tales out of school! Don't believe what you see in the newspapers, Miss Burton—I beg your pardon, Mrs. John. There's many a lubber sits in a warm room with a pen in his hand professing to teach me my duty two thousand miles off in a gale of wind on a lee-shore, and all the while it would puzzle him to take a Thames wherry from London to Southwark! When I see a statement in print, my first impression is not to believe a word of it."

Nelly stared, never having considered the great invention of civilisation from this point of view, but felt inclined to agree with the outspoken seaman nevertheless.

"I'll believe all *you* tell me," she observed; "only begin at once. Aunt will be here with the tea in five minutes, and I've heard nothing yet."

"First, will you answer me a question?"

"Of course, if I can."

"Is there much going on just now in the way of—in the way of—well, gaiety, I suppose you call it, Mrs. John? Dances and parties, and that kind of thing?"

"I am the last person to ask," she answered, half surprised, half amused. "I can give you the *Morning Post*, if you like, and you can see for yourself. You may believe the fashionable column, though it *is* in print."

"All right," he said. "Now I'll be as good as my word. I am ready to tell you everything you want to know."

While he spoke Mrs. Phipps entered the room, followed by a maid with a well-spread tray, and the account of the Arctic Expedition was deferred till after tea.

CHAPTER XXII

CIRCE

THE Royston butcher, a prosperous person who generally owns a trotter, has driven away from the back premises of the Grange with a well-pleased smile. The baker also, a churchwarden and man of mark in the parish, has shouldered his basket, and returned to his ovens at peace with all mankind. One or two shopkeepers from the neighbouring market-town have been paid their bills in full, finding, much to their contentment, that the housekeeper is satisfied with a smaller *douceur* than they were prepared to give. Mrs. Mopus, they opine, is an excellent woman of business, methodical, clear-headed; quite the lady in dress and manners, with a proper sense of that live-and-let-live system which seems so advantageous to the profits of their respective trades. Mr. Roy leaves everything to her management: she understands economy thoroughly, and is not above the duties of her place.

These would seem more onerous than might be supposed in the absence of the family, and consequent diminution of weekly expenditure. They confine Mrs. Mopus for hours together in her own private apartment, where she sits over her desk in the attitude of a child learning to write, trying steel-pens one after another with a degree

Trying one steel pen after another.

of care and precision that appears superfluous for so easy a task as the adding up of a column of figures in a book. "It's a difficult job," says she, stretching her fingers, cramped with long-continued effort, "but I have mastered it at last. I don't think you would know one writing from the other yourself, my fine madam, and I'm sure Mr. Roy wouldn't, even if he should take it into his simple head to audit his own accounts—a thing he has never done but twice since I've been with him. That man was born to be put upon. If I didn't make my profit of him, another would!"

Then she drew from a drawer a sheet of note-paper on which were a few lines of directions for the repair of table-linen, written in Mrs. Roy's clear running hand, and compared it with her own imitation. The latter was an exact counterpart of its original: and so well had Mrs. Mopus succeeded in her dishonest undertaking, that she had taught herself to falsify, without fear of detection, entries and figures in the house-books, which Mrs. Roy, till the day of her departure, had scrupulously kept with her own hand. She expected to reap no small harvest from her ingenuity when her master came to settle these; and was enabled, therefore, to discharge the tradesmen's bills with a liberality that astonished them, both on Mr. Roy's account and her own.

She had received a letter from him to say that he would be home on the morrow, but only for a few hours, to look round the place, pay bills, and leave her some money to go on with. Business in town, he wrote, obliged him to return by the evening train, and Mrs. Mopus, keen-sighted enough when her own interests were concerned, trembled

lest this business should mean overtures of reconciliation with his wife.

"Not if I know it!" she muttered, shutting her desk with a vicious snap. "It has been 'pull devil, pull baker' ever since she first came into our house, with her cool, commanding airs and mean, prying ways. It will be strange if I can't pull hardest yet. I am up to your tricks, my lady. I can see through you as if you was made of glass; and the day you walk in at the front door I walk out at the back! But that day will never come—don't think it! Other people can turn gentlemen round their fingers besides you; and it's strange if Mr. Roy don't believe just whatever I please. Dear, dear, if I had only been ten years younger, I could have made a fool of him, as well as any lady in the land!"

He was making a fool of himself at present, without even the excuse of downright earnest for his extravagances. Resolving every morning to break off his intimacy with Lady Jane, and calling on her every afternoon, he was yet tortured by a hankering after the wife who had left his house, while pride and indecision alike forbade his aiming at a better understanding, and he scorned even to inquire whether she was in London or not.

Her ladyship, too, had become captious and exacting. There is nothing a woman accepts so readily as a false position; nothing that, after she has tried it, irritates her so much. "What do I care for the world's opinion, if I have only got *you*!" Though somewhat reckless, does not the sentiment seem noble, generous, self-sacrificing? How much less sweet is the same voice in a month or two, when it protests, "You have no consideration —no proper feeling. One cannot be too careful,

when everybody is watching, and you have no right to show me up!"

What Lady Jane wanted, as she told herself, was that Mr. Roy should put away his wife and marry her out of hand. To talk of its being impossible was all nonsense. Did not people, we all knew, get divorces every day? This she was justified in expecting, and with less than this she would not be satisfied. If Mr. Roy had neither courage nor ability to take so decided a part, there was but one alternative: she must give him up, brave the covert sarcasm of her friends, who, while applauding her prudence, would infer that he had got tired of her, and resolve never to see him again! She did not half like the notion. How dull her afternoons would be without him; and if she wanted to be taken to the play, she must be taken by somebody else! Her ladyship rather prided herself on constancy, and was beginning to fancy, with admirable self-deception, that she had been in love with Mr. Roy all her life.

These conflicting feelings, this consciousness of insincerity, or rather what we may term half-heartedness, was bad for the tempers of both. The one thought the other exacting, the other not only thought, but said, she was ill-used. The gentleman grew silent, the lady spiteful. On a certain evening, while shivering together in a chilly cloak-room, they almost came to open rupture; and though the Latin poet tells us that lovers' quarrels are a renewal of love, Cupid in London is exceedingly impatient of punishment. If you whip this little unbreeched boy too smartly, he is apt to run away and take refuge with somebody else!

The most permanent attachments are those of which the stream glides smooth and silent. Custom

sits comfortably by the drawing-room fire, long after sentiment has been turned out of doors into the street. If I wanted a lady to care for me, she should hear of me very much, and see me very little; for you must keep your hawk hungry when you would have her stoop freely to the lure. I should never come near her unless prepared to be agreeable; and though true as steel, of course, would not let her feel too certain of her dominion while I was out of sight. Above all, I should avoid such scenes as the following, which were now enacted by Lady Jane and her old admirer almost every day.

"Where did you go last night when you left here? Straight home?"

"No. It was too early for bed, and I went on to smoke a cigar at my club."

"Nowhere between?"

"Well, I just looked in at Lady Pandora's; but I don't think I stayed five minutes."

"Lady Pandora! That odious woman! When you know I detest her! The only person in our own set that I positively refuse to visit. And it was miles out of your way. You must have had some attraction?"

"What attraction *could* I have? She has asked me regularly for every one of her Tuesdays, so I walked in, made my bow, and walked out again. Why shouldn't I?"

"Oh! of course, I have no right to object, neither can it matter to *me*, one way or the other. I daresay you found it very pleasant. Who was there?"

"The *Morning Post* will tell you that. All London, I should think, except yourself. A thousand women, each with a train seven feet long. There wasn't much standing-room."

"Was the Sphinx one of them? I don't care about the other nine hundred and ninety-nine."

Now the Sphinx, so called from her magnificent bust, classical features, and exceeding taciturnity, was a young lady recently arrived in London from the United States.

For more than a year it had been the fashion to admire everything American; and the Sphinx found a series of triumphs waiting for her in Belgravia that she never could have achieved in New York. Lady Jane, with considerable ingenuity of self-torment, had chosen to fancy this lately imported beauty wanted to captivate Mr. Roy.

"Of course she was," answered that gentleman rather nervously, for, like the rest of his sex, he dreaded the commencement of a row. "I defy you to go anywhere without meeting the Sphinx—as large as life, in a new dress from Paris, just unpacked, worth ever so many thousand dollars, and cut down to low-water mark, at least!"

"You can't turn it off like that! You may as well admit that you went to Lady Pandora's on purpose to meet her. Don't flatter yourself I care. It's only of a piece with everything else."

They were sitting as usual in Lady Jane's boudoir. The visitor stretched bodily in an easy-chair, mentally laid out to be broken on the wheel; his hostess placed opposite, on a sofa, with her back to the light, and some embroidery in her lap, that progressed but slowly stitch by stitch.

"Lady Jane," said Mr. Roy, with a solemnity that seemed ludicrous even to himself, "how often must I assure you that I care no more for the Sphinx, as you call her, than I do for—for"—

"Than you do for me! Or for any of us!"

interrupted her ladyship with asperity. "That only makes it worse. That only shows you have no feelings, no heart. I ought to have seen it long ago, when you broke off with me at first!"

This, from a lady by whom he had been outrageously jilted, was "rather too good." It roused him to assert himself as he should have done from the beginning.

"If you think that, Lady Jane," said he, rising as about to take leave, "you have done a life's injustice to both of us. When we were young I loved you so dearly that to lose you drove me out of England and nearly broke my heart. I think you knew this as well as I did. If you had been my wife, and it was your own choice that you were *not*, I would have tried to make you happy. I see it would be impossible to do so now. Perhaps it is my fault. Perhaps I am changed. I have had my share of troubles, and I daresay they have soured me. I may be incapable of that exaggerated devotion which women seem to expect; but I can only tell you, believe it or not as you like, that to this day I go round any distance to pass the old elm where you and I parted in Kensington Gardens all those years ago. I had heart and feelings *then*. I knew it to my cost!"

His voice shook, and there was a ring of truth in its tone. She bent over her work to hide the tear that *would* steal over her nose and fall on the embroidery in her lap.

"Sit down again," she murmured. "Are you *quite* sure you don't care for the Sphinx—not the least little bit in the world?"

"The Sphinx!" His tone must have carried conviction to the most suspicious of rivals, it expressed so profound a contempt for the suggestion,

perhaps because of its extreme improbability; the young lady in question, who was only half his age, being at present much sought after by the highest magnates in the land.

"If I could only believe it!" sighed Lady Jane, smiling through her tears with an upward look that made her beauty more alluring than ever. "You cannot understand. A woman's happiness is so wholly dependent on the affection of the man she —the man she—I won't be afraid to say it—the man she loves!"

Then down dropped her work on the carpet, and, hiding her face in her hands, she burst out crying in good earnest.

To use Lord Fitzowen's expression, "the coach was getting the better of the horses"; and it was time to stop now, if John Roy ever meant to stop at all. He wondered what made him think of Fitz at such a moment. The image of his lordship, which was somewhat unwelcome, and the necessity of picking up the embroidery, afforded an interval of reflection, and he resisted with laudable discretion his first impulse to take Lady Jane in his arms and console her as best he might.

How she did, or did not, expect him to act, must be matter of conjecture; for at this interesting juncture the bump of a tray against the door announced the arrival of a footman with tea. The lady, in spite of her deeper agitation, recovered composure far quicker than the gentleman; while the well-drilled servant, whose manners and figure had recommended him to several first-rate situations, neither betrayed nor indeed felt the slightest symptoms of surprise.

By the time a spider-table could be drawn from its corner, and the tea-things arranged thereon,

visitor and hostess had returned to their senses, the *status ante* was re-established, and they were ready for a fresh subject of dispute on which to fall out again.

"You dine here to-night, of course," said her ladyship, as the footman left the room. "I have two or three men coming, and I want you to be host. Don't say you have 'a previous engagement,' or I'll never speak to you again!"

"If I had, I should throw it over; and I will do my best to help you with your men."

"You don't ask who they are! Mr. Roy, I can't quite make you out. I sometimes wonder, if other people paid me attention and that kind of thing, whether you would mind it or not."

"Why should I mind it? I can't expect you to shut yourself up in a box; and, of course, you must meet with admiration wherever you go."

"I don't want their admiration! I don't want people to think me nice. At least, only one! I wish I was as sure of somebody else. What are you going to do to-morrow? Will you take me to the Aquarium in the afternoon?"

"To-morrow I shall be out of town. I must go down to Royston Grange."

"To Royston Grange! You never told me a word about it. Mr. Roy, that means that you have heard something of your wife."

He laughed carelessly, but winced a little nevertheless. "It means," he replied, "that a man with a house in the country must go and look at it sometimes, if only to make sure that it hasn't run away. There's a steward to see, and a butler, and some horses, to say nothing of butcher and baker, and such small tradesmen, who are only to be convinced I haven't fled the country by

payment of their accounts. Why, Lady Jane, how many weeks do you suppose it is since I have seen my own home?"

"I don't know. It seems like a dream. That day I met you, my brocade velvet was quite new—the first time on—and I gave it to my maid this morning. Yes! it must be a good many weeks. I wish they were to come over again. How long do you mean to stay away?"

"Shall you miss me?"

"Not the least in the world! I shall only watch the clock, and every time it strikes, think there is another hour gone! I shall only puzzle over Bradshaw, and learn by heart all the trains that can bring you back. I shall only listen to every ring at the bell, every step on the pavement, every cab in the street, till I see you again. That's all! Don't flatter yourself I shall miss you!"

"Then it's just possible I may not return till to-morrow night."

She gave him a bright look of gratitude and affection. "How nice! I shall see you the day after. Come to luncheon. As early as you can. Mr. Roy, I believe you do care for me a little, after all."

Mr. Roy thought so too, wondering how this ill-fated, untoward tanglement was to end.

CHAPTER XXIII

ARACHNE

"WILL you come into my parlour? said the spider to the fly." On the present occasion Mrs. Mopus had determined to be the spider, and settled in her own mind that Mr. Roy should enact the part of the fly. Her web must be thin and impalpable as gossamer, but tough and holding as the strongest rabbit-proof wire-netting that ever brought a hunter on his nose. With a jealous temperament, covetous of money, covetous of power, covetous of influence, she yet entertained a half-contemptuous regard for her master, like that of a schoolmistress for one of her stupid pupils, as a creature to be pitied and taken care of, but punished and coerced without scruple till it should do as it was bid. He must come under no petticoat government but her own. She had made her mind up on that point, and, above all, she must keep him apart from his wife. So long as Mrs. Roy was banished, so long would Mrs. Mopus rule the household, retaining all the emoluments of office, and she would stick at nothing to fortify so desirable a position, as events sufficiently proved.

Mr. Roy was as good as his word. After doing the honours of Lady Jane's dinner-party in a constrained, uncomfortable manner, no less embarrassing to the guests than compromising to

the hostess, he started next morning by an early train, arriving at his own place in good time for luncheon. That meal he found prepared with exceeding care. His favourite dishes were dressed to a nicety; his claret, cool, not cold, had been nursed to the right temperature, and a nosegay of garden flowers, standing in the centre of the table, fresh and fragrant, scented the whole room.

"I gathered them myself, sir," said Mrs. Mopus, "the first thing this morning, while the dew was on. You was always used to flowers with your meals, sir, in old times. It's well that somebody should remember your likes and dislikes, Mr. Roy, for I think you have not had fair-play, sir, with them that has been about you of late."

"Thank you, Mopus," answered her master, who was hungry after his journey. "I'm sure you never forget anything. Yes, it's all very nice, and the roses are beautiful, and—and—when I want you I'll ring."

So she left him to discuss his meal in solitude, rightly conjecturing that when his appetite was satisfied he would send for her again.

After a cutlet and a glass of claret, Mr. Roy became more at ease. The well-known carpet, the old furniture, the family pictures, the freedom from restraint, and general sense of comfort, above all, the country hush and quiet, so refreshing after the ceaseless roar of London streets, made him feel he was really at home. And presently, when a soft breeze wafted its summer scents through the open window, the force of association brought back to him his wife's image, with a reality so vivid that he could almost fancy he heard her light step and the rustle of her dress in the next room.

Why had he not been more patient, more forgiving? When she left his house, it might be only because of wounded love and pride, why had he not taken more pains to trace, follow, and bring her back? Perhaps he had no rival in her affections, after all. Perhaps she was at that very moment pining in her hiding-place, thinking of him, wishing for him, longing only to be forgiven and to come home. If this were so, he had done her cruel injustice, and ought to repair it without loss of time. But again, why had she made no advances towards reconciliation? Why had she never so much as reminded him of her existence by an advertisement, an anonymous letter, a message, or token of any kind? Would a guiltless woman be content thus to remain subject to the gravest suspicions? Above all, would a guiltless woman leave a home like this—and he looked round with complacency—in a mere fit of unreasoning temper and caprice? He would give a great deal to find out the truth. Mopus, from various hints she had dropped, seemed a likely person to afford such information as he required. He would ring for Mopus, and satisfy himself at once how much she did or did not profess to know.

His housekeeper answered the bell readily enough, arriving with an armful of account-books, which she deposited on the table at his elbow.

"I've got the bills downstairs," said she cheerfully, "and the receipts, all correct. I hope you will run your eye over them, Mr. Roy. It's a sad trouble, I'm afraid, sir, to *you*, but it's a satisfaction to *me*."

He looked askance at the pile, as a dog looks at the spot where he has been punished.

"Presently, Mopus, presently," he replied. "In the meantime, sit down. I have one or two questions I want to ask.

"Now it's coming!" she thought, and nerved herself to answer, right or wrong, with a steadfast regard to her own interests, and nothing else.

"In the first place," he resumed, emptying his glass, "do you remember coming to my room before luncheon the day my—the day Mrs. Roy left this house.

"I do, sir. It isn't likely as I should forget."

"Do you remember what you told me?"

"Every mortal word, Mr. Roy. It were the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Your suspicions seemed excited by the frequency of a certain person's visits to Mrs. Roy, and the pleasure she took in his society. Was that person Lord Fitzowen?"

"Mr. Roy, it were."

"And your observation led you to believe that there was some secret understanding between them, discreditable to both?"

"I won't deny it, sir. The day as you come home so wet, and his lordship stayed so long, I watched him and my mistress, when they thought as nobody could see them, for the best part of an hour, Mr. Roy; I couldn't help it!"

"From mere curiosity, or because you suspected something wrong?"

She knew that he put the question to gain time, as dreading further revelations, for his lips were dry, and, while he poured himself another glass of wine, the bottle shook in his hand.

"Curiosity, sir! You can't think so bad of me, I'm sure. Oh, Mr. Roy, do you suppose that because I am a servant I have no gratitude, no

affection, no self-respect, nor knowledge of right and wrong? Was I going to see *you* put upon, the best of masters, the kindest of gentlemen, and hold my tongue? Curiosity! says you. I wonder at you, sir. I never had no curiosity, but I can tell you I see some curious things!"

The suspense was intolerable. "What *did* you see?" he exclaimed. "Speak out, my good woman, in the devil's name, and have done with it!"

"Well, sir, I see your lady walk his lordship off into the library, where there was no fire, and as little light as might be nigh sunset on a winter's evening. It's not my place to take notice, sir, but I couldn't be off noticing that. They must have something very particular to say, thinks I, if it can only be said in the dark. If you will believe me, Mr. Roy, I was that upset I could hardly trust my own eyes!"

"Why didn't you follow them? It was your duty to *me*!"

"I've done my duty by *you*, Mr. Roy, fair and square, ever since I come into your house, but there's things that is *in* a servant's place, and things that is *out* of a servant's place. Mr. Roy, I hope I know mine. No, sir. I ran up to my room, locked my door—there's Sophy upstairs can prove it if you ask her—and cried till it was time to put the dessert out, because I felt so vexed."

He rose and paced the floor, muttering and gesticulating as if he were alone. Mrs. Mopus, watching him carefully, resolved on giving the poison time to work.

"I can't believe it!" said he. "I won't believe it! After all, there is nothing tangible, no positive evidence, no actual proof. I shouldn't have a leg

to stand on in a court of law. Oh, what would I not give to be quite sure one way or the other!"

"Will you please cast your eye over the accounts?" continued Mrs. Mopus in a matter-of-fact, business-like tone, as wholly ignoring all this by-play. "There's an overcharge of one-and-ninepence in the ironmonger's bill, but I have placed it to your credit, sir, on the next page; and Sarah's wages is paid up to the day she left, and the new maid begins on the twenty-fourth. I think you will find everything correct."

So Mrs. Mopus glided softly out of the room, rightly concluding that she would be left undisturbed for the next hour at least.

A good deal, she reflected, might be accomplished in an hour with skill, courage, ingenuity, and, above all, a steady hand.

John Roy sat over his house-books without moving a finger, scarcely an eyelash, staring hard at the straight-ruled columns, yet taking little note of their homely details as to expenditure of pounds, shillings, and pence.

He was back in the wet spring weather once more, brandishing his billhook among the dripping laurels, cheerful, contented. Yes, he was contented then, he told himself, with a happy home and a wife he loved. After all, what mattered her little shortcomings in manner and knowledge of the world? They only made her seem more charming, more unsophisticated, more entirely his own! When Lord Fitzowen cantered up the park to pay his visit, Nelly had been more precious than rubies, a treasure beyond price.

Then with that fatal evening rose the rankling doubt. Could such gold be dross, such a diamond only paste after all? He had been forbearing, he

thought, and patient, had not judged hastily nor in anger, had used his own faculties, calm and temperate, like a rational being. Could he have arrived at any other conclusion but that his wife was false? Good, faithful Mopus seemed to entertain no doubt, and for these matters women had far quicker eyes than men. Well, it simplified everything to be satisfied of her guilt. There *was* a heart left that could console even such a calamity as his; a heart that had ached for him through long years of separation, and that wished no better than to make its home on his breast at last! Could he obtain actual proof of his wife's infidelity, he might do Lady Jane justice, and ask her to marry him as soon as the Court of Probate and Divorce would allow.

It was characteristic of the man, that when he came to this determination he could so far abstract his mind from his grievances as to add up column after column in Mrs. Mopus's books with the attention of a lawyer's clerk. The mistress, no doubt, would have detected seven-and-sixpence charged for oil that ought to have cost five shillings, half a crown for soap and candles instead of eighteenpence, and a consumption of cheese below-stairs that might have supplied the county; but the master, in happy ignorance, passed swimmingly over all such trifles, congratulating himself on the accuracy of his own arithmetic, which tallied with his housekeeper's to the uttermost farthing.

"I will send you a cheque by to-morrow's post," said he, meeting her in the passage.

"Don't mention it, sir!" answered Mrs. Mopus in her blandest manner, but continuing to interpose her person, which was tolerably substantial, between Mr. Roy and the hall-door. He knew he had not done with her yet.

"What is it, Mopus?" he asked, with less impatience than he would have shown to any other servant in his household, because of all she knew.

"There was one thing more, sir," said she, looking paler and speaking quicker than usual. "Only one thing as I wanted to ask about particular. But I wouldn't trouble you to-day, Mr. Roy,—not if you was likely to be soon here again."

"Soon here again, my good woman! Certainly not. Do you suppose I have nothing else to do but travel up and down our hateful railway in trains that never keep their time? Out with it once for all and have done! I hope you won't see me again for six months."

What a white face was that of which the features twitched so uneasily and the eyes could not be brought to meet his own! He did not fail to notice her changed appearance; and before she could speak a word in reply, asked anxiously if she was ill.

"I have not been quite myself, sir, for the last day or two," answered Mrs. Mopus; "and it's such a pleasure to see you back in your own home, Mr. Roy, that it has upset me a bit, that's all. What I wanted to speak about was a jewel-case as your lady left on her table unlocked. I should wish to give it over into your hands, sir, just as it was when she went away."

"All right, Mopus. Let us go and have a look at it."

So they went upstairs to poor Nelly's room, the husband hardening himself at every step against a host of memories and associations painfully connected with his wife.

Mrs. Mopus, pointing out a shallow, oblong

box, observed that, having found it unsecured, she had neither touched it herself, except to dust, of course, nor suffered the maid to do so, till her master should come home. "And now, sir," she added, "it's only fair for you to open it this minute and see what it contains with your own eyes."

He complied languidly enough, as taking little interest in the matter. There were but a few chains and bracelets of trifling value coiled in their velvet resting-places, and he was wondering vaguely what he should do with them when Mrs. Mopus, who watched every movement, called his attention to the tray on which these trinkets were disposed, observing there might be banknotes or what-not, as she expressed it, put away in the vacant space beneath. He lifted it, accordingly, to find a sheet of letter-paper bearing his wife's monogram (how well he remembered that morning in the library when they invented this hideous device between them), inscribed with a few sentences written in her clear, fine running hand! The first line sent the blood to his head, and but that he caught the edge of the dressing-table to steady himself he must have staggered against the wall. With the British instinct, however, that forbids a man acknowledging a hurt, and prompts him to get on his feet again directly he has been knocked down, John Roy folded the paper, and coolly putting it in his pocket, thanked his housekeeper for the care she had taken of his property, and desired her to lock the jewel-case away in one of her store-closets, as he felt confident it would be even safer in her hands than his own.

While she curtseyed her acknowledgments, he passed out, muttering something about the "stable," and that "he should see her again before

he went." But his voice was hoarse and indistinct, his face drawn and white, like that of a man who has sustained some mortal hurt.

It was half an hour before he visited his horses; an interval of time he spent pacing a walk skirted by thick Portugal laurels, that screened it from observation of prying eyes, either in the house or offices. During this half-hour he resolved on his future course. There seemed no more room for doubt, no further plea for compunction or delay. He had substantial proof in his pocket at last, and the woman who had deceived him need be his wife no longer, by the laws of earth or heaven.

It was a relief to see his way clear before him; it was a satisfaction to know he could do a loving heart justice after all; but it was a torment and a puzzle to feel at this most untoward juncture that he could not resist instituting many comparisons between Nelly and Lady Jane.

CHAPTER XXIV

OUT OF SOUNDINGS

"IS Mr. Brail going to live with us altogether, auntie?" asked Mrs. John from the recesses of her glass house, while she made out that naval officer's frugal account under a date that showed how many weeks he had been in the occupation of his bedroom. "He's a credit and a comfort, I won't deny; but don't you think, auntie, he ought not to waste his time in London? And I fancy he's unhappy too, which seems so strange in a *man*."

Nelly's own experience led her to overrate the advantages of the other sex; she did not understand how masculine spirits could be affected by anything short of positive misfortune or ill-health.

"He won't wear out his welcome *here* in a hurry," answered Mrs. Phipps, with a beaming smile. "It's like old times to have both of you back at once; and if I could see *one* look a little merrier, Nelly, I wouldn't trouble about the other. However, he must be on the move again soon, he says. He's not been down to visit those aunts of his in the country yet, and he was never one to forget old friends. But I don't think he takes so much pleasure in things as he used, and I've seen him looking out of spirits sometimes myself, what I call 'down,' when I've met him going in and out. I wonder what's the matter with him."

"I can tell you, auntie—Mr. Brail is in love!"

"Lor', Nelly! Not with *you*, my dear?—don't say it. Well, I should have thought he was the last to trouble about the women. You surprise me, my dear! And I remember him a slip of a lad in a jacket and turn-over collars! Are you sure, Nelly? How can you tell?"

The niece knew the symptoms. So, perhaps, did her aunt long ago, though the good lady had forgotten such frivolities now.

"I'm certain of it," said the former. "Don't you see that he wears kid gloves, and a flower in his buttonhole? The flower I think little of, but clean gloves mean they are very far gone. It's the worst sign of all!"

"And you don't know who it can be, Nelly?" asked Mrs. Phipps, keenly interested. "I should think as the best lady in the land would never deny Mr. Brail, not unless she had given her heart to somebody else, of course."

"Why, auntie," laughed Nelly, "I believe you're in love with him yourself. What a pity you don't encourage him! He might live with us for good and all, and give no more trouble making out his bill."

Mrs. Phipps, pleased to see her niece so cheerful, laughed heartily—"If I was your age, Nelly," said she, "and he made bold to ask, don't you be too sure I should say No! Well, my dear, if the young man must have an attachment, I can only pray it may be a happy one. There's ups-and-downs in most things, 'specially in keeping an hotel; but of all uncertain business in the world, matrimony is the most risky. Sometimes you make fifty per cent. profit without so much as moving in your chair, and sometimes you find you

are broke before you can turn round! My dear, I'm not sure but that for us women it isn't better let alone."

Nelly pondered. Hers had indeed been a ruinous speculation, yet she could scarcely bring herself to wish she had never taken her chance. It was something to have enjoyed that one fortnight of happiness at Beachmouth, something to feel assured it had been shared by the man she loved, to know that he could never again all his life long see a strip of tawny sand, a seagull on the wing, or the white curl of a wave without thinking of the wife he misunderstood so cruelly, though she prized his happiness far above her own.

"It's weary work, auntie," said she, with a sigh. "Sometimes I wish I had never been born, and then I hate myself for being so ungrateful and so wicked. After all, there's a good time coming, if we can only keep straight. Everybody has reason to be thankful, and I am often ashamed to feel so dismal and out-of-sorts just because I can't make the world over again in my own way."

"Nonsense! Nelly. You're too good for any of us. You're a sight too good for *him*. But we won't speak of that, for I tell you it gives me the cold creeps right down my back. Happily, we are not all made alike—gentlemen especially. There's as much difference in men as there is in your boots, my dear. Some will let the water through the first time on, and others will last you, rough and smooth, wet and dry, till they're worn into holes. If our Mr. Brail is not sound leather, Nelly, I'll go about in my stocking-feet for the rest of my life!"

Mrs. Phipps was no bad judge. The gallant lieutenant knew his own mind, and was prepared to encounter any difficulties on the chance of

winning the girl he loved, just as he would have faced a battery, or an ironclad, or the surf on a dangerous reef, with a quiet, cool resolution that was discouraged by no obstacles, while it never threw a chance away. If the enemy were to baffle his attack, or the broken water to swamp his boat, he would at least perish like a gentleman true to the death, and go down with all the honours of war!

But the pursuit of a young lady through fashionable circles, by an admirer whose position affords him no prescriptive right of entrance, is uphill work, involving much expenditure of time, much exercise of ingenuity, much anxiety, heart-burning, and consumption of that dirt which frank and generous natures eat with exceeding difficulty and disgust. It is bad enough to undergo the daily torture of uncertainty as to her engagements, an uncertainty, as she cannot be altogether a free agent, that is shared by herself, to fret and fume when she misses an appointment, or, keeping it, is monopolised by a score of rivals, with all the odds of wind and tide, tonnage, and weight of metal on their side; but it is worse to feel at a disadvantage, even when she has done her best to bridge over the gulf of an irrational and offensive conventionalism, because of the illiberal free-masonry that excludes outsiders from exchanging the passwords of the craft; and, worst of all, to detect in her constrained manner, her wandering attention, that she, too, admits certain deficiencies in her adorer, and pays him so doubtful a compliment as to wish him other than he is.

Though the world we live in, from increasing numbers, becomes less artificial every day, there is yet room for improvement in our manners, as

regards that genial courtesy which extends the same privileges to all who have been favoured with the same invitation. A true gentleman desires to place his companions on his own level, and, following the example of the highest gentleman in the land, raises his society without lowering himself, sharing with each the interest or amusement of the hour, and, to use a familiar expression, allowing nobody "to be left out in the cold!"

"I have been hunting you about like a dog that has lost it's master," whispered Brail, in a certain ballroom to which he had obtained access, at the cost of two afternoon teas, attended from five till seven, a box at the French play, and a dinner to a young cub aged sixteen at his club. "Will you give me a dance at once, or must I be put on the black list and wait till after supper? Miss Bruce, I scarcely ever see you now."

Such whispers are usually answered out loud when anybody is listening, whereas young ladies prefer to speak very low, if sure of not being overheard.

"Do you know my chaperon?" was Hester's inconsequent reply—"Lady Pandora, Mr. Brail."

"Who is he, my dear? and what?" asked her ladyship, who had no compunction in treading on the tenderest of feet, and spoke in a fine sonorous voice through her nose. "I never heard the man's name before.

"A friend of papa's," answered Miss Bruce readily, and passing her arm through the sailor's, permitted him to lead her off to a quadrille.

How his honest heart thrilled as he felt that hand lie so lightly on his sleeve. What would he have done could he have known what I know, that Hester had discovered him ten minutes ago, and

kept this dance disengaged on purpose? I think he would have gone down on his knees to her before the whole quadrille, taking his chance of removal to a mad-house or a police-station then and there.

She was not going to confess how much she liked him for a partner, but she did whisper, with a pretty little blush—"Lady Pandora takes me out, you know, when papa is engaged. She gives a ball of her own on the thirteenth."

He had not served so short an apprenticeship but that he could accept the hint, and turned his mind at once to the problem of how he should get an invitation. On reflection, he determined he would ask Lady Pandora to go down to supper, and ply her with champagne.

Miss Bruce did not fail to notice his abstraction and express her disapproval.

"Have you anything to tell me about your travels?" said she, with a toss of her handsome little head. "You might have been no farther than Putney, for all I have heard yet."

"Do you care to know?" he asked, feeling exceedingly foolish, and trying not to look too much in love. "Haven't you forgotten all about ships and sailors in that long eighteen months?"

"Why should you think I have so short a memory? Is it out of sight out of mind with *you* directly you get into blue water? That is what I ought to say, if I remember right. Your *vis-à-vis* is dancing alone. Why don't you attend to the figure?"

So he was compelled to break off at this interesting juncture and go cruising about, as he called it, over the well-planked floor. Before he could bring-to again, Miss Bruce's mood had changed.

"I wonder you don't write a book," said she; "an account of your Arctic adventures. I am sure it would be very funny."

"Funny!"

"Well, I mean very interesting. My cousin Frank wrote a narrative of his voyage to the Scilly Islands. I didn't read it, but everybody said it was capital."

"Everybody is interested in the Scilly Islands; nobody would buy a book about the North Pole."

"Nonsense! It would bring you in loads of money. I will take half a dozen copies myself."

"Why need you? Don't you know that I should like nothing better than to sit and spin yarns to you from morning till night? Don't you know"—

"Don't *you* know that you are *cavalier seul*? Really, Mr. Brail, I have danced with a great many inattentive partners, but you are quite the most careless of all!"

"You would make any partner inattentive. And it's just the same when you are leagues and leagues away. Do you know, Miss Bruce, one night when it was my middle watch, and I was thinking of you"—

"What's a middle watch? You can't wear three watches at a time! I never heard of more than two, and then only on Dick Turpin or Claud Duval—*grand rond.* Give that lady your other hand. Now make me a sea-bow, and take me back to Lady Pandora. Perhaps she will ask you to her ball."

Surely this was encouragement enough. Surely he need not have felt disappointed that he could make no more of the opportunities afforded by their dance, and that the sentiments he would fain

have expressed were cut short by the exigencies of the figure. Whether or no, his life had at least taught him at all times to improve the occasion, and when Miss Bruce was carried off in the gyrations of a waltz by a long-legged gentleman with a glass in his eye, Mr. Brail did his best to ingratiate himself with the formidable lady who had his treasure in charge.

This was a less difficult task than he expected, for the girl had whispered to her chaperon that he was "the famous Mr. Brail, the great Arctic explorer," and her ladyship, who dearly loved anything in the shape of a celebrity, was prepared to afford him the more homage that she had not the remotest idea where, or why, or how he had earned his claim.

When a lady has become, I will not say too old, but too heavy to dance, it is touching to observe how unselfishly she resigns that wild excitement, those turbulent pastimes, for which the majesty of her figure is now unfitted, and contents herself with the many pleasures she has left. Because obliged to sit on a chair against the wall, it does not therefore follow that she has become wholly unattractive to the simpler sex. While lighter limbs are bouncing and darting and getting hot in the turmoil of the dancing-room, she may while away many pleasant moments in the cooler atmosphere of gallery, conservatory, or staircase, with that interchange of sentiment and opinion which is just too earnest for small talk, too conventional for flirtation. Should it overleap the bounds of the latter, is it the less welcome? Should it fall short of the former, is there not the unfailing resource of the supper-rooms? And can anything be more delightful than a judicious combination of all three?

It is a closer race than we might imagine at first sight, between the matron with her champagne-glass and the maiden with her teacup; a trifling individual superiority will balance the attraction either way, and taking mamma to supper is in many instances a much lighter penance than young ladies are apt to suppose.

Brail, as became his profession, was chivalrously courteous to all women, irrespective of weight or age. His genial nature and manly bearing made an exceedingly favourable impression on Lady Pandora, though I fear he did not return her good opinion, confiding subsequently to Hester that she reminded him of the figure-head of a ship.

Meanwhile he plied her ladyship freely with refreshments and information about the Arctic Circle, storing her mind with many remarkable facts, to become still more remarkable as she reproduced them in her crowded dinner-parties.

"That's an agreeable man, my dear," observed Lady Pandora to her charge, while they drove home in the calm, clear morning. "How polite he was about the carriage, and he got it in five minutes. Sailors are always so ready. He liked my dress too, and thought the trimming very pretty. Sailors always have such good taste. I suppose because they see so much variety. I like him better than the young whipper-snappers you generally dance with. What did you tell me his name was?"

"Brail," answered the young lady, with rather a tender accent on the simple monosyllable.

"I'm sure to forget it, my dear. Never mind. Send him a card for the thirteenth. We shall have done the civil at anyrate, though I daresay he won't come."

Miss Bruce was of a different opinion, and it is

needless to say that Collingwood Brail, Esq., Royal Navy, received his invitation in due form.

Alas for Gog and Magog! Their beloved nephew again put off his visit; but they comforted each other, good, simple souls, with the conviction that he was detained for approbation of the Admiralty, would be examined before both Houses of Parliament, and in all probability sent for to Balmoral by the Queen.

How he looked forward to this particular festivity, and what a disappointment it was after all! In vain he arrived before the very music, a solecism which would have been unpardonable in a landsman, and remained to the last, even till Gunter's merry-men began to take away. Hester was engaged ten deep. He only danced with her once, when she seemed colder than usual, silent, and even depressed. Our nautical friend was quite taken aback. He could read, nobody better, the signs of mischief brewing on the horizon; the stooping cloud, the rising sea, the tokens that warned him to shorten sail and look out for squalls, but he had yet to learn how a woman's fair face may be no certain index of her mind, and how the shadow on her brow does not always mean displeasure at her heart. Greater experience would have taught him that Hester's pale cheeks and guarded tones augured suspicions of her own indifference, mistrust of her own firmness, a mutiny, so to speak, between decks, that must be kept down by the stern rule of discipline and self-restraint. He was winning, had he only known it, hand over hand, while he believed himself drifting hopelessly to leeward, a mere water-logged wreck that could never come into port again.

He watched for a kind word, a kind look—but

the girl's eyes, though he *felt* them on him more than once, were always averted ere they met his own, and the few words she vouchsafed would have been considered, from other lips, intolerably common-place and inane! Too loyal to revenge himself by embarking on a series of flirtations, too dispirited to attack in force, boldly and at once, which would have ensured victory, he was content to stand mute in a doorway, and watch her figure as it floated by, with the humble fidelity of a dog, and something of that creature's wistful expression, half surprised, half reproachful, when it has been punished without cause.

How the kind face haunted Hester that night, or, I should say, that morning, while she laid her weary head against the pillow. She was dreaming of it at ten when her maid woke her with coffee, and looked for it that afternoon in a score of places, actually bidding the coachman drive down Whitehall past the Admiralty, on the vague chance that Mr. Brail might be going in or out.

That night she went to the French play; no Mr. Brail! He was not much of a linguist, but would have attended a comedy in Sanscrit had he known Miss Bruce was to be amongst the audience! Next day she visited the Botanical, and even the Zoological Gardens, with the same result. "Those dear white bears," as she called them, nearly made her burst out crying. At the end of a week she had decided she was the most miserable girl in the world, and must give up all hope of ever seeing him again; but before a fortnight elapsed came the inevitable reaction, certain as the back-water from an inflowing tide. She told herself she loved him dearly. There was nothing to be ashamed of, and, come high, come low, she would marry no man on earth but Collingwood Brail.

CHAPTER XXV

STANDING OFF-AND-ON

HE lieutenant, too, was having what he called "a roughish time of it." He took himself seriously to task for his own self-conceit, and came to the conclusion that it was madness for a man in his position to aim at such a prize as Miss Bruce. He had too much respect for her to conclude that she was only amusing herself at his expense, and indeed knew his own value too well to encourage a suspicion so uncomplimentary to both. What he *did* think was, that she had begun to care for him a little, and feeling such an attachment would not be for her future welfare, had resolved to stop while there was yet time. If this was the case, how ought he to act? Our friend had been brought up in a school that lays great stress on duty, making it, indeed, the first of all earthly considerations, and Brail's duty, he told himself, was to secure Hester's happiness at any cost. Could it be ensured by his absence, he would not hesitate to get afloat again, were he offered the worst berth in the worst ship that carried the royal ensign, and he wandered more than once down to the Admiralty with the intention of applying for

immediate employment, on the farthest possible station from home. But he paused when he reflected that, with his claims, there was little chance of such a request being denied; and if Hester should change her mind in the meantime, should really want him back when he couldn't come, the position would be even more disheartening than at present. With all his courage and self-denial, to sacrifice her, as well as himself, seemed beyond his strength. It was not for lack of consideration that he arrived at no definite conclusion. Hours and days were passed in debating the one subject that engrossed his thoughts as he walked on foot through the parks, squares, and principal thoroughfares of the West End, perhaps in the vague hope of an accidental meeting, arguing the point again and again, with a different result at every turn.

Sometimes the waft of a southern breeze, a wave of lilacs overhead, the voice of children playing in a garden, would change the whole aspect of his future, and he would tell himself that even in this life there were higher and happier aims than the giving of dinners, the keeping of carriages, or the holding one's own in general society, with something very like the effect, rotatory, but not progressive, of a squirrel in its cage. Then he would paint for himself a little cabinet picture of a snug villa, a trim lawn, perhaps a nurse with a perambulator, and Hester's figure in the foreground, as he had once seen her, rigged for a garden-party in a white chip bonnet trimmed with forget-me-nots, and blue ribbons about her dress.

Oh, if she were only a penniless beauty like so many of the others! If Sir Hector would but invest his all in an explosive speculation and be

ruined! Gladly would he take them both to his happy little home, and share with them, oh, how freely! the modest pittance of a lieutenant's half-pay.

Having persuaded himself such a romance was possible, he would walk on with a clearer brow and lighter tread, till his dream was dispelled by some common-place incident that tumbled him down to the realms of reality once more—such as the giving of a shilling to a crossing-sweeper that he wanted for a cab, or the denying himself a cigar because of the washing-bill on his dressing-table, and that his month's pay was ebbing fast in the daily necessities of London life. Those kid gloves, from which Nelly drew such alarming conclusions, formed no inconsiderable item of weekly expenditure; but I think he would rather have gone without his dinner than abated one article of personal adornment, so long as there was the remotest likelihood of meeting Miss Bruce.

And this was a man who could shin up the rigging as deftly, or pull as strong an oar in the gig, as any able seaman under his command!

But in these walks abroad, that which dispirited him most was one continually recurring disappointment. London carriage-horses, particularly bays with good action, are very much alike. It requires a practised eye to distinguish brass harness and dark liveries, one set from another; while all ladies in summer dress, bowling quickly through the air, resemble garden flowers stirred by a breeze. Ten, twenty times in an afternoon would he be startled by the approach of some well-hung barouche that he fondly hoped bore Sir Hector Bruce's crest on its panels, his daughter within; and as often would the smile of welcome freeze

round his lips, the hand snatching at his hat fall awkwardly to his side.

But oh! the scorn with which contemptuous beauties, well known to others, unknown to him, ignored while they detected the abortive homage thus checked ere it could be offered at their shrine! No man can long tread London pavement without observing—shall I not say admiring?—the inscrutable demeanour of these high-born, high-bred ladies—

> Who in Corinthian mirrors their own proud smiles behold,
> And breathe of Capuan odours, and shine in Spanish gold.

The eager look, the pretty bend, the flattering greeting to those gentlemen who have the honour of their acquaintance, as contrasted to the cold, cruel indifference bestowed on all the world beside; the haughty bearing, the implied disgust, and the abstracted glance beneath half-closed lids, that seems to say, "It does not matter the least, but I wonder you presume to be alive."

Mr. Brail, who felt on such occasions that he was by no means "the right man in the right place," would then blame himself severely for "humbugging about," as he called it, when he ought to be shouting his orders from Her Majesty's quarter-deck in a monkey-jacket, with three feet of ship's telescope under his arm.

But going to the levée, as in duty bound, presented by his captain, and kindly welcomed home from an arduous service in a few cordial words by the best judge of manly merits in the kingdom, to whom he made his bow, Brail began to rise again in his own esteem. It could not hurt a man much, he thought, to be ignored by a few fine ladies, who felt that he had done his duty to his country, and who found the value of his services

heartily acknowledged by his Prince. When he backed out of that presence-chamber, through which he had passed with more trepidation than he would have felt under the fire of a harbour-battery, he could not but reflect that he was somebody after all. Officers of high standing in both services, covered with medals and decorations, earned in that deadly peril which proves the genuine steel, greeted him as one of themselves. A colonel of the Guards, with an empty sleeve, put out his remaining hand; a vice-admiral of the red, bravest among the brave, noted for his hilarity of spirits at the most critical moments, patted him kindly on the back; while a dashing hussar, maimed, shattered, tanned to the bronze of his own Victoria Cross, asked him to dinner that very day. He stood among the men who make history, and he was one of them. Cabinet ministers desired his acquaintance; the most affable of bishops greeted him with a benignity that seemed tantamount to a blessing; while the handsome sailor-prince vouched for him with professional cordiality, observing that "he was not only a smart officer on deck, but as good a fellow and pleasant a messmate as ever broke biscuit below."

It would have been a proud day for Gog and Magog could they have witnessed their nephew's triumph. It *was* a proud day for Mrs. Phipps when she received to luncheon in her own parlour this handsome young sailor fresh from his presentation, in the uniform he kept on at her particular desire, looking, as she declared with a redundancy of aspirates on which she laid the lightest possible stress, "Happy, handsome, and hearty, and a hero every inch!"

Nelly was summoned from her bookkeeping to

hear the whole account of the levée; waiters lingered and loitered unrebuked; housemaids pervaded the passage to catch the gleam of his epaulettes; the dirty face of a charwoman peeped above the kitchen stairs; and the work of the whole establishment came to a standstill in honour of Mr. Brail's late appearance at St. James's Palace in appropriate costume.

But all this brought him no nearer Miss Bruce. The veterans were not in her set; she was little acquainted with differences of rank, military or naval; and it seemed unlikely that she would so much as read the list of presentations in the *Morning Post* next day. Our gallant lieutenant could not but reflect with a sigh how willingly he would exchange this bushel of glory for a grain of love or hope. Men who allow themselves to become unhappy about the other sex have various ways of betraying their discomfort. Some take to cards, some to drink, a few abjure the society of their natural enemies, scrupulously avoiding a petticoat as a bird avoids a scarecrow; but the majority incline to seek solace in such gentle company as reminds them, not unpleasantly, of her who has done all the mischief; and on some strange principle of homœopathy, derive considerable benefit from the soothing smiles and kindly glances women are always ready to bestow on real objects of compassion. About this time Brail began much to affect the quiet conversation of Mrs. John, to pervade the entrance-hall in which stood her glass case; nay, even on occasion to invade that sanctuary and mend the pens, or hold the ruler while she posted her books. Though she tolerated rather than encouraged these intrusions, there sprang up between the two a firm and lasting

friendship, originating in interests and experiences common to both; none the less staunch and consoling that such interests and experiences were less akin to pleasure than to pain.

Each had a grief of the same nature, a wound in the affections that required the salve of sympathy and commiseration. That of the man was a mere scratch, of the woman a deep and deadly hurt. Of course, the latter bore her pangs in silence, while the former cried aloud for help.

It was not long before Brail confided to Mrs. John, as he had learned to call her, the whole story of his attachment, and Nelly, in the pitiful kindness of her nature, could not conceal from him that she had made the acquaintance of Miss Bruce during the previous winter, that she highly appreciated her charms, both of body and mind, and that her intuitive tact as a woman had led her to detect some symptoms of a lurking preference in Hester's manner and conversation, though she had been egregiously mistaken as to the object. By degrees it came out that they both knew Lord Fitzowen, Brail having met that young nobleman more than once in the maze of London society, and Nelly was sorely tempted to give the sailor her entire confidence, in the hope that she might learn something definite about Mr. Roy.

She checked herself in time; nor, indeed, was Brail disposed to take much interest in any matters but his own. To find someone who knew Miss Bruce, who admired her, who understood her, who had a suspicion she liked him, and who would listen while he talked about her, was such a piece of good fortune as could not be too much appreciated and enjoyed. He missed no opportunity of visiting Mrs. John in her sanctum, and attending her on

her affairs, so that even auntie lost patience, declaring, almost with ill-humour, "You two seem never to be apart. I'm sure whatever you've got to say to each other must have been said over and over again!"

CHAPTER XXVI

COUNSEL'S OPINION

JOHN ROY returned to London with his freedom, he firmly believed, in his pocket. On that sheet of notepaper his wife had inscribed in her own hand such expressions as were tantamount to an avowal of guilt, as would surely be held conclusive in a court of law. He dreaded the exposure, he winced from the shame, he even pitied the culprit; but while he sat in the train, reading this document over and over again, his heart grew harder with every perusal, prompting him to carry out his merciless intention to the bitter end.

"This," he thought, "comes of not marrying a lady! Why, she cannot even express herself in good English, and though I ought to have expected it, there is a vulgar tone about the whole production, not much less offensive than its actual depravity! No doubt Fitzowen's rank constituted the attraction —she could not resist the glitter of his coronet— she was glad to take *me* because I was a gentleman. She has deserted the gentleman for a lord; d—— me, she'd throw *him* over for a duke! *C'est ce que c'est que la femme!* I ought to have known better from the first! I ought never to have believed in one of them. And yet they cannot all be so bad. There must be *some*, surely, who are to be trusted

when one's back is turned, and who mean what they say!"

Is it not so with the rest of us? We holloa loudly when we are hurt, but we lose no time in applying plaster to the wound. "Women are all alike!" cries the indignant husband, the despairing lover. "Women are so different!" reasons the former, with a second-hand consolation, the latter with a bran-new fancy, while the cynic laughs at both, and agrees with neither. "So far from women being alike," says he, "they are not even the same for two hours together. So far from being different, their noblest sentiments, their most pitiful weaknesses, their best and worst qualities, are common to the whole sex." And the wise man—. My friend, there is *no* wise man where women are concerned, neither in fact nor fiction! Was not Merlin made a fool of in romance and Solomon in history? Vivien is no less real than the Shunammite, and both are of all degrees, all nations, and all times.

Let us peep over John Roy's shoulder while he reads his wife's letter once again.

"My very dear Lord,—I will look for you as usual on Tuesday, and expect as you will not disappoint me like you did last time. Mr. Roy is sure to be out a-hunting, so no doubt but the coast will be clear, and nobody will notice if you come right up to the front door and ring the bell—that is better than the garden-way; for servants have such sharp eyes, and always suspect something. I write because you said you was not sure you would come; but if you fail, I shall begin to think you do not care for me as I feel to care for you, my dear. I may be interrupted at any moment; so no more at present from your loving sweetheart,

"Elinor Roy."

No date—women are very vague about dates—but her name—oh! unutterable disgrace, *his* name, signed in full. Every stroke of the well-known

autograph correct to a hair—the very flourish with which she loved to adorn it, finished off to a scratch! There could be no mistake as to the whole meaning and intention of this shameless production. It had obviously been written at leisure, and kept back for a convenient opportunity to be posted unobserved. Tuesday! Yes, he remembered how he intended to hunt on that very Tuesday, when he came to an open rupture with his wife, but changed his mind on the previous Sunday because of lame horses in the stable. It was clear enough. The letter had not, therefore, been sent, and in the hurry of departure she forgot to destroy it. No doubt there had been many such exchanged, and this one left little impression on her mind. How could such a woman write that clear, firm, Italian hand? How could she look so guileless, so fond, so handsome? He felt he must have loved her dearly once to hate her so bitterly now! But this was no time for remembrance or regret. He would act for himself, and carry the whole business through without compunction or remorse.

He did not take Lady Jane to the Aquarium, but wrote instead so affectionate a note as caused her very heart to glow with a sense of satisfaction and triumph. While she put it away in some safer hiding-place than the bosom of a dress changed three times a day, Mr. Roy was driving into Lincoln's Inn for a personal interview with that unerring adviser, that unimpeachable authority, that unquestionable institution, the family solicitor.

I suppose nobody ever crossed the threshold of his "own man of business" without a painful consciousness of mental inferiority; less the result of professional inexperience, of pitiful ignorance

concerning the wonderful ways of the law, than of a strange sense that he has been suddenly shifted, as it were, to the stage side of the footlights, and begins to see everything in life from an entirely novel point of view.

That which appeared an hour ago as clear as the sun at noon, seems now to require corroboration by a mass of evidence. The statement, prepared with so much thought and study, that carried conviction in every sentence, is found to be loose, garbled, incapable of holding water, and in some respects tending to furnish arguments for the other side. Facts are no longer stubborn, except in the one sense that they stubbornly elude substantiation, and the litigant is surprised to find how much he has been in the habit of taking things for granted that have no legal existence till fortified by actual proof. He doubts his own senses, memory, and reasoning powers, vaguely conscious of a benumbing imbecility, and approaches the shrine of his oracle with as little self-dependence as the most ignorant of savages asking help from his god.

A clerk in the outer office—pale, inky, but of a self-important demeanour as being brimful of law—took the client's name to his employer, and returned with "Mr. Sharpe's compliments, he was engaged at present, but would see Mr. Roy in a quarter of an hour." There was nothing for it but to wait in the office, and make the most of yesterday's *Times*, as perused in an uncomfortable attitude on a shiny high-backed chair.

"Mr. Sharpe will see you now, sir," said the clerk, when the stated time had expired, ushering out an old lady in black, smelling of peppermint and dissolved in tears. "This way, sir. Allow me, ma'am, if you please," to the lady, who was

fumbling helplessly at the door handle, and John Roy found himself fairly committed to make his statement under the critical observation of Mr. Sharpe.

"Take a seat, sir. A fine day, sir; warm, but seasonable for the time of year," were the reassuring words of that gentleman, as he scanned his client from under a pair of bushy eyebrows, that gave character to a countenance in other respects common-place enough. "We have not met for a considerable time, Mr. Roy, and I hope I see you well."

His client's mouth was dry, and his answer wholly unintelligible.

Mr. Sharpe, fitting the tips of his fingers together with the utmost nicety, afforded no more assistance, but waited for the other to begin.

It was no easy job. "Mr. Sharpe," he stammered, "I have come to consult you professionally — professionally — you understand; of course in the strictest confidence, entirely between ourselves, and to go no further."

Mr. Sharpe bowed. He was used to these preliminaries, accepting them with mild contempt.

"My business," continued John Roy, sadly discomposed, "is of a very disagreeable kind!"

"Nothing remarkable in *that*, sir!" returned his solicitor. "If business were not usually disagreeable, we lawyers would have nothing to do."

"The fact is, Mr. Sharpe, that I—that I—I have reason to be much dissatisfied with my wife."

"Nothing remarkable in *that*, sir!" returned his adviser. "Forgive me for saying so—it is a *commune malum*, for which there is no remedy at common law. May I ask, sir, is the lady residing at present under your roof?"

"Not the least! That is what I came to talk about. She has left her home for several weeks, and I have no means of ascertaining where she is."

Mr. Sharpe grew more attentive, but waited for his client to go on.

"I have reason to believe she came to London," resumed the visitor, "and perhaps I might be able to trace her movements if I chose to take the trouble, but having quitted my house at her own caprice, she shall not re-enter it with my consent. I mean to state my case fairly, and ask your assistance to set me free."

"One word, Mr. Roy. Is there no prospect of reconciliation? Ladies are apt to be hasty—inconsiderate, and repent when it is too late. I should be willing to mediate between you, not professionally, you understand, but as a private friend."

"It is no question of anything of the kind," replied the other in great heat and excitement. "Matters are so bad that I am justified, morally, and, I believe, legally, in cutting myself adrift from a woman who has dishonoured me."

"That is a grave accusation," replied Mr. Sharpe with some solemnity. "May I ask, sir, if you have any proofs?"

"Judge for yourself!" returned the other, placing Nelly's letter on the table. "If that is not proof, I don't know what they require. I'll have a divorce, Mr. Sharpe, as sure as you sit there, if it costs me ten thousand pounds."

The lawyer perused it attentively, twice over, took a sheet of paper, made a memorandum or two, and returned the important document to its owner without a word.

"Well?" asked the latter, expecting, no doubt, an outbreak of virtuous indignation.

"That letter, sir, is compromising, very compromising, no doubt," admitted the solicitor. "*Primâ facie*, it argues a degree of intimacy with the person to whom it is addressed, that a husband would be justified in disallowing. I cannot, however, advise you, Mr. Roy, that this, and this alone, would be held proof sufficient to justify the taking of our case into court. I assume you have consulted me with a view to ulterior proceedings. May I ask how you propose to act?"

"That is what I want *you* to tell *me*. I mean to have a divorce! How am I to set about it."

The lawyer pondered. "In matters of so delicate a nature," said he, "direct proof is of course difficult to obtain. At the same time, the presumptive evidence must be very conclusive, not a link must be wanting in the chain; there must be motive, intention, opportunity, and the injured party must come for redress with clean hands, or it is my duty to advise you the court will not grant a rule."

"Do you mean they won't give me a divorce? Then all I can say is, that the laws of this country are a fallacy, and its justice a sham!"

"I do not go so far as that, my good sir. I only point out to you certain difficulties you must be prepared to encounter, certain conditions indispensable to success. This letter carries with it a large amount of indirect testimony. I have seldom seen so much in so few lines, and its very shortness argues a probability that it is one of many others similar in character; for a correspondence of this nature, if at all limited in opportunity, is usually exceedingly diffuse. I assume, of course, that there is no difficulty in proving your wife's handwriting?"

"None whatever. Besides, my housekeeper found the letter hidden away in Mrs. Roy's jewel-case."

"What is your housekeeper's name?"

"Mopus—Mrs. Mopus. She has been with me for years. I can trust her. I *have* trusted her with untold gold."

"Before your marriage?"

"Before and after. Nobody in the world can have my interest more at heart."

Mr. Sharpe made another memorandum, and continued his questions in the same low, equable tone.

"Your wife left her home on the thirteenth?"

"On the thirteenth."

"Alone, do I understand? and without your consent?"

"She never asked it. I remonstrated with her on the frequency of a certain person's visits, and she went off in a huff. My carriage and servants took her to the station, where she dismissed them, and I have heard nothing of her since."

"Till you obtained possession of this letter? How did it fall into your hands?"

"Very simply. I went home lately to pay bills and wages. Hearing from my housekeeper that a jewel-case had been left in Mrs. Roy's room unlocked, I went to examine its contents. By mere accident I lifted the tray, and found that letter concealed beneath."

"Had you any previous suspicions of your wife? Had you occasion to reason with her, or to express your disapproval of her conduct, at any time before the difference that led to her sudden departure?"

Mr. Roy now entered into a long and rambling

statement, detailing many matters already narrated, and on which it is unnecessary to dwell, the more so that Mr. Sharpe, though closely attentive, seemed to think them of little importance, and never put pen to paper once during the recital. When his client finished, however, he rose as if to conclude the interview, observing in the matter-of-course tone he had preserved throughout—

"There appear at least sufficient grounds for further inquiry. I presume you would wish me to submit the case to counsel, and take the best opinion I can get?"

"Go to the sharpest fellow out! I don't care what it costs. And let me know as soon as you can, for this suspense is more than I can bear!"

Then Mr. Roy seized his hat and made his escape, driving straight off to visit Lady Jane, that he might give her a detailed account of his proceedings, and be soothed by the sympathy that he felt he had a right to expect, that she was now more than ever willing to afford. Both seemed to believe the chief obstacle to their union was removed, and to consider the expected counsel's opinion almost tantamount to a licence from Doctors' Commons for immediate wedlock. After considerable delay, it arrived in due course—sound, practical, sensible, and carefully expressed, balancing pros and cons, the chances for and against, with a nicety and exactitude that left the matter at precisely the same degree of uncertainty as before.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE IRREPRESSIBLE

"WHERE have you been hiding all this time? I thought you had quite forgotten us. One never sees you now."

Miss Bruce shaded her eyes with a pink-tinted parasol from the sun-glint off the water. Her carriage had been drawn up by the Serpentine, and Lord Fitzowen was leaning against the door.

"I am flattered to think I have been missed," answered that young nobleman, who did not seem quite in his usual spirits. "I hardly suppose you are pining for *me*; but without wishing to be rude, Miss Bruce, I cannot help observing you look pale and tired. I hope there is nothing the matter."

She smiled, not without a little blush that denied the charge of pallor for itself. "London dissipation, I conclude," she answered wearily. "But you need not have told me I am hideous. We go out night after night, you know, the same round, like horses in a mill, and what's the use?"

"Exactly the question I was asking myself when I caught sight of your carriage. I was meditating, you understand, by the 'sad sea-wave.' That is all very well for *me*. But, Miss Bruce, why do *you* come here?"

The blush that had faded rose again a shade deeper. She was not going to tell him or anybody

why, but for some reason of her own the Serpentine reminded her of Mr. Brail.

"Do you suppose I can't meditate too?" she returned, lowering her parasol. "I was reflecting just now what useless lives we lead, you and I and the rest of us, wasting our time in amusements that *don't* amuse us after all!"

"That's the grievance! I never used to be bored. Never knew what fellows meant by the word. And—now!" The yawn with which he pointed this disheartening confession sufficiently attested its truth.

Lord Fitzowen had insensibly passed one of the landmarks set up to remind us that in this world of change we must be carried with the current, rest on our oars as idly as we may. There comes a time for most men, usually before they are thirty, when boots, coats, horses, and cigars seem stripped of their engrossing fascinations. To have seen a favourite tried at Newmarket, to be on visiting terms with a popular actress, are experiences that no longer raise them in their own esteem, and they wake up, as it were, to a new world, of which they seem no less ignorant than the chicken bursting from its shell. This is the period at which men take to work in good earnest; and, strangely enough, the idlest in youth often becomes busiest in after life. This is the period, too, at which they bitterly regret the time hitherto lost, the bad start that prevents their being more forward in the race, realising in chances neglected and advantages thrown away Lord Lytton's touching lines of him who

> Paltered with pleasures that pleased not, and fame where no fame could be.
> And how shall I look, do you think, Will? with the angels look-at me.

How shall the best of us look in such company? And how the angels must wonder we can be such fools!

"A *man* has no right to be bored," said Miss Hester, with a curl of her lip. "You have so many pursuits, so much excitement. Not like *us*. When a woman is really unhappy, what resource has she in the world?"

"She can always sit down and cry."

"As *you* would sit down and smoke. Nonsense. Some of us have too much spirit to cry. We get cross though, I don't deny it, and then we make the people about us as uncomfortable as ourselves."

"Men have not that consolation."

"Haven't they! There we differ. It seems to me that a man's troubles react on the women who are about him, even to his aches and pains. We bear your burdens and our own too."

"I wish you would lend me a hand with mine."

"So I will if I can. We are old friends, Lord Fitzowen, and may trust one another. You know, you need only ask for my poor little help. It is not much, but would be freely given."

Now in this cordial profession Miss Bruce was not quite so sincere as she persuaded herself. No doubt she felt pleased to meet his lordship again, and would have made any common-place social exertion to do him a favour, but her principal reason for retaining him at her side with such an appearance of interest was the excuse thus afforded for a delay that would otherwise seem strange in the eyes of the coachman and footman who had her in charge. After dropping papa at his club, to return for him in an hour, she caused herself to be driven to the Serpentine, avowedly for "a breath of air." In the distance, at least half a mile off,

she had spied a figure very like Mr. Brail walking towards her in company with a lady while she was conversing with Lord Fitzowen. So long as she remained in the same place, this interesting couple could not but pass under her nose, so she must keep his lordship a few more minutes at the carriage-door as an excuse for standing still. Hester's eyes did not deceive her. Collingwood Brail and Nelly were indeed taking a walk together in the Park. The kind young sailor, unhappy himself, had noticed the constant depression of Mrs. John's spirits, and recommended his favourite remedy, a "good long cruise in the fresh air." Nelly, who yearned in her heart for something more rural than the Strand, consented, nothing loath, and the pair wandered socially into the Park—up the Ride, over the bridge, past the Powder Magazine, and along the water's edge. Nelly caring little where she went, and Brail choosing this particular walk because he had once heard Miss Bruce admit that she thought it "rather nice."

But keen as was Hester's sight we may be sure the sailor's practised eye made out the carriage and its occupant, even before he was himself recognised. Nelly marked his bronze cheek turn pale, and he stopped short in the middle of a sentence. "Mrs. John," said he, with rather a foolish laugh, and the gulp of a man who is making a clean breast of it, "you know about Miss Bruce. I've often mentioned her. That's her carriage! There she is!"

If he liked Mrs. John before, she earned his eternal gratitude now. For sufficient reasons Nelly had no desire to be recognised by any neighbour who remembered her at Royston Grange, least of all by the handsome, happy girl whom she had received under such different circumstances

as a guest in her own house. It was with no consideration for her companion, but in a sheer instinct of self-defence that she exclained—

"Walk on, Mr Brail! go and speak to her! I know you won't be happy if you miss such a chance. I'll wait here; or, better still, I'll find my way home alone. No, don't apologise. I should really prefer it, and if I'm tired I can take a cab."

He felt bound to remonstrate, but not "with a will," and, it is needless to add, went on by himself with a heightened colour and a beating heart.

Miss Bruce, who saw him coming, grew absent and restless. To Lord Fitzowen's conversation, which conveyed indeed nothing particularly new or interesting, she made the most inconsequent remarks; and Fitz, who was not without the social instinct called "tact," felt he was actually "in the way."

"No doubt," he reflected humbly, and with resignation, "this is part of the whole thing. I bore myself intensely, and am becoming a bore to other people. Even Miss Bruce can't stand me for more than ten minutes, and would rather sit here deserted in the wilderness than undergo my platitude any longer. I accept the omen. I have become a fogey. I must make up my mind to be rubbed out, and content myself like other fogeys with the evening paper and the club."

So his lordship bowed himself off, and, without once looking behind him, strolled leisurely away.

Our business is not at present with Collingwood Brail, but if he was the man we take him for, it seems improbable that he would suffer so auspicious an occasion to pass unimproved. Rather will we follow Lord Fitzowen, who, placidly coasting that straight and mathematical piece of water called by

Londoners the Serpentine, drifted into the least frequented part of the Ride, just in time to meet Nelly pacing calmly home.

She knew him a hundred yards off. There was no mistaking the light easy gait of that unforgotten figure, the well-cut clothes, the high-bred air, and the hat worn jauntily aslant, in virtue, as he used to protest, of his Irish title. She half stopped and half turned aside, but thought better of it, and walked on. After all, why should she not meet him? He was a link with the past life, that now seemed like a dream. He lived in the world from which she had been shut out. He must know, perhaps he would tell her, something of her husband, and it was doing him only justice to admit he ought to be welcome for his own sake. He had always been kind, considerate, and agreeable. She was glad to see him, and would not pretend to be anything else. Had she cared for him ever so little, she could not but have been gratified by his manner while he accosted her. He was not shy. It had been proverbial in his old regiment, that "what would make Fitz blush would make another man fly the kingdom." Nevertheless, the woman he admired and regarded more than any other in the world came upon him so unexpectedly, that she put him utterly to rout. He was disarmed, unmanned, colouring and cowering like a schoolboy, suspecting he looked, and satisfied he felt, like a fool.

Two people in such a position are seldom equally confused, or what a world of cross-purposes we should have! One gathers confidence from the disorder of the other, and women, I verily believe, for all their assumed timidity, have more social courage than men.

Nelly put out her hand heartily enough, and he took it with the homage a subject renders to his queen.

In such a crisis our compatriots, who have seldom much to say at a moment's notice, take refuge in the most minute inquiries as to each other's health, only stopping short of feeling pulses, and looking at tongues, in the engrossing interest they profess for mutual salubrity. When Lord Fitzowen and Nelly had satisfied themselves in turn that neither was a sufferer from organic disease, there ensued an awkward and protracted pause, broken by the lady, of course.

"I wonder you knew me," said she. "It is so long since we met, and you cannot have expected to see me here."

"Knew you!" replied his lordship, finding speech restored as by a miracle. "Don't you think I should know you anywhere? Do you suppose there is another Mrs. Roy in the world, or if there were a hundred, that I could mistake any woman alive for *you*! Have you forgotten"—

"But, my lord"—

He held up his hand. "You are not to say 'my lord,'" he interrupted. "I am sure you must remember our compact, and you may trust your dictionary as frankly now as you did then."

The playful manner, the kind, protecting, yet wholly courteous, tone, took her back to the happy times of love, and wedlock, and Royston Grange. She had been living a life of complete seclusion, at her own choice, indeed, but none the less dreary for that, of daily duties, businesslike, irksome, affording little scope for variety, none for interest; she had gone into no society whatever, and had scarcely stood face to face with a gentleman,

except Collingwood Brail, for many weeks. Can we wonder she felt unable to resist the charm of Fitzowen's pleasant companionship, and accorded freely his humble request that he might see her to the end of the Park, and put her into a cab to take her home?

He had too much experience to startle her by asking point-blank what he wanted to know, and had tried in vain for some weeks to find out, namely, where she lived, what she was doing, and whether he might call on her in her own house? His code of morals was one of which we cannot approve, the result of a false system of education, and adopted, in common with other young men of his kind, less from innate depravity than an utter absence of that religious principle which alone defines the border of right and wrong.

It would have been difficult to make Fitz understand why a woman separated from her husband should not be as completely a free agent as a man who had never been married at all. He could see that it was wrong to disturb wedded happiness and the peace of families, to blight a girl's hopes or taint a woman's reputation before the world with the lightest breath of shame. Such injuries he would no more have inflicted than he would have made fun of the deaf, tripped up the blind, or struck a man when he was down. To his own code of social morality, as it may be called, he adhered strictly; but this left a wide range wherein he felt at liberty to disport himself as he pleased.

That he was doing injury either to herself or Mr. Roy in trying to win Nelly's affections, now that she had voluntarily left her home, he would have stoutly denied; and had you told him his intentions were evil, simply and solely because

opposed to the law of God, he would have admired your sincerity, pitied your bigotry, and declined to argue the subject with one who saw it from so different a point of view.

The passions are bad enough; but if we have to battle with the affections, we want all the help we can get. The devil had no worldly experience when he took the form of a serpent. He knows better now, and comes in the shape of an angel, appealing to our higher feelings, our better nature; arguing, plausibly enough, that those sentiments cannot be unworthy which elevate us above our kind. We have but one answer: "I *may* not, and therefore I *will* not!" Nobody ever yet regretted its enunciation; and there are many reasons, notwithstanding the well-known argument of the French princess, why "No" is a more valuable expression than "Yes."

"I have never seen you about anywhere, Mrs. Roy," continued his lordship in a light, easy tone, at which she could not take alarm. "I have wondered, and fidgeted, and feared you were ill, and tried in all sorts of ways to learn what had become of you; but I am so discreet I have never asked one of our mutual acquaintances to help me in my search."

"Do you see many of them?" she returned, quivering all over to think that this man might have dined only last night in company with Mr. Roy. "I am always pleased to hear of old friends, to be reminded of anybody or anything connected with Royston Grange."

"Have you not been there since the winter?" he asked, in the hope of drawing an avowal of some sort.

"Lord Fitzowen, you *know* I have not!"

"Forgive me, Mrs. Roy, I *did* know it. I am such a coward I only put the question to gain time. Of course I knew. Of course I have heard all sorts of stories. Of course I believe nothing but that you are wholly right, and everybody else grossly in the wrong."

"What have you heard?"

"Only the common gossip of the world; the handfuls of mud with which it likes to pelt those it envies for their superiority. People talked of a quarrel, a separation, incompatibility of temper, unworthy accusations. I was only convinced you had been shamefully ill-used."

"Why should you think *that*?"

"Why! Because I know it instinctively in my heart of hearts. Because you are unlike most women, and better than all. I do not pelt you with compliments, or throw your personal attractions, charm of manner, and so on in your teeth. You are above that kind of thing. But if you were as plain as you are—well, as you are *not*, I should still quote you as the person of all others most likely to make a happy home for any man in his senses. Good Heavens! what more can a fellow want?"

"I was not born a lady," she said, with a thoughtful, far-away look that denoted some engrossing interest wholly unconnected with the flatterer at her side.

"A lady! Then what in the name of prejudice *is* a lady? I know a good many—I think I ought to be a judge. My dear Mrs. Roy, quite the most *un*ladylike woman of my acquaintance goes in to dinner before half the peeresses in London. She is rude, yet exacting; shy, but overbearing; awkward, ill-dressed, and as ugly as sin; in all respects a

complete contrast to yourself, and, except for her rank, has no more claim to be called a lady than your cook! Now, will you tell me that birth or station has anything to do with it, and that there are not natural gentlewomen, *really* gentle, and—and lovable, in every class of life?"

They were pleasant words, they salved her wounded spirit like drops of balm. Fitz, always enthusiastic—a quality to which, in these lackadaisical times, he owed much of his popularity—had worked himself into a great heat and excitement, fully convinced for the moment that society demanded complete reconstruction from a new basis, at the level—wherever that might be—of this beautiful Mrs. Roy.

"Unequal marriages never answer," she replied softly. "Mine was only another example of the rule."

"Because you married a man who did not understand you, did not appreciate you; and whom, therefore, it is impossible you can have really loved."

"Lord Fitzowen, you do not think so badly of me as that!"

"Think badly of you! I, who believe in you as the pattern of everything a woman should be! Who esteem and honour you more than any other creature upon earth; who, if you had only been free, would have"—

"Lord Fitzowen, will you kindly call me a cab? We are at the end of our walk. I am glad to have seen you again. Good-bye."

She put out her hand, which he held for a moment, while he asked, "Where shall I tell him to drive?"

"I can give him his orders when I get in."

Do you see that hansom?

He felt hurt, and showed it. "Will you not even trust me with your address?" said he reproachfully. "What have I done that I am never to see you again?"

She looked him full in the face with those deep, clear, honest eyes.

"My lord, you are a gentleman, you are a man of honour, and you profess to be my friend. Can you not see that, situated as I am, you could inflict no greater injury than by seeking my company at home or abroad? I will not deny I was glad to see you to-day, and when my misfortunes permit, I shall be glad to see you again; but in the meantime I do not intend that we shall meet, and I require you on no account to follow me home. It must be so, believe me, and I know you will be, as you always were, kind and considerate and unselfish for my sake."

"By Jove! you're the best woman in the world," answered Fitz, completely subdued, and helping her into a hansom cab, with tears in his eyes. "I'll do anything you ask me, now and always. God bless you, Mrs. Roy, and good-bye!"

But he could not give her up so entirely, all the same. Before he had walked twenty yards along the pavement he spied a limber fellow in a red waistcoat, who had held his horse and done his errands on many occasions, and he could not resist the opportunity.

"Do you see that hansom with a grey horse?"

"And a white 'at, my lord? Yes, my lord."

"There is a lady in it; follow her wherever she goes, and bring me her address. Do you want any money?"

"No, my lord—yes, my lord—all right, my lord!" and the man vanished like a sprite.

It is thus we travel to our inevitable destination. One step forward, and two back; such is the pilgrim's unassisted progress along the narrow way.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHAMPING THE BIT

JOHN ROY, like the rest of us, seeing every prospect of attaining his wishes, began to think that, after all, he was not much better off than before. He seemed, indeed, less a free agent than ever, hampered by an actual wife and a possible at the same time. Lady Jane, too, whose former husband could have attested that she was not remarkably temperate in single harness, bounced and fretted, and made herself exceedingly disagreeable as one of a pair. Since Roy confided his intention of obtaining a divorce, her ladyship had assumed many airs and graces, less becoming to a widow than a bride.

Her friends, finding them useless, discontinued their expostulations, and her intimacy with Mr. Roy, which had ceased to be a nine days' wonder, seemed now accepted as a matter of personal convenience, creating no interest and little surprise. A woman never likes an admirer so much as while she has to stand up for him, and Lady Jane, missing the excitement of fighting *his* battles with her friends, was fain to substitute that of fighting her own with *him*. He belonged to her now, she argued—might be considered, to a certain extent, in the light of a husband, and must be treated accordingly.

During this period of probation our injudicious friend often found cause to regret the mild and equable rule of the wife he had abandoned. Lady Jane seemed to expect from him the ready docility of courtship, combined with the good-humoured indifference of matrimony. He was to do exactly what *she* liked. She was to do exactly what she pleased. He must be in waiting to attend her at all hours, to all places, while not objecting to be shunted, at a moment's notice, for such of her less advanced acquaintances as still disapproved of the connection. She paraded him at church, of course, and at all the theatres; nay, she once went so far as to take him out shopping, and kept him by her chair, at Marshall & Snelgrove's, a whole mortal hour!

He kicked freely that time, and it is only fair to say she never tried him so high again.

But they were growing a little out of love with each other day by day. Somehow the bloom was off the thing, and both began to experience an uncomfortable sense of thraldom, though neither could have explained why. Her heart beat no faster now when she heard his knock, and he had ceased to follow it upstairs two steps at a time. But a link is none the less secure because for gold has been substituted iron, and although they often quarrelled, nay, sometimes yawned, they seemed to affect each other's company more than ever.

That jealousy may exist without love is a position only seemingly untenable to those who have not studied the more paradoxical sex, in the rise, progress, and inevitable decay of their affections. With a man, indeed, the sense of proprietorship seldom survives an attachment, and it is only justice to admit that when a woman is once out

of his heart she never enters his head; whereas, perhaps, from deeper tenderness, perhaps from more insatiable rapacity, perhaps—how can I tell? —from a mere instinct of acquisitiveness, common in all animals to the female, a lady never wholly abdicates of her own free will, but like a dethroned sovereign clings to the empty forms of a lost royalty, closing her baffled fingers on the fading shadow of a substance that has passed away.

Lady Jane's jealousy seemed to increase rather than diminish with her waning affections. If Mr. Roy was five minutes later than the time specified for an engagement, she told herself, and him too, that she was sure he had some other attraction; that he felt his present connection a servitude and a clog; that he was naturally inconstant, as she had bitter reason to know! else, why was their youthful attachment nipped in the bud? and why, after deserting his first love, had he now deserted his wife?

The manifest injustice of such a reproach stung him to the quick, and he spoke out, "Hang it! Lady Jane," said he, "you and I had better understand each other before it is too late! I do not underrate the sacrifices you are making on my behalf. No, and I don't forget them. I am sure you remind me of them often enough. But I, too, am in a false position, and a very uncomfortable one besides. Look at my future. It is dependent on lawyers, and servants, and evidence, and an uncertain tribunal, of which I dread the publicity. Yes, I dread it, though I know that justice is on my side. Now *you* are all right. You have nothing to consult but your own wishes. If you want to dismiss me, you need only say the word, and you are free!"

"What nonsense you talk! Suppose I *should* say the word?"

"I must take my hat and go! It would not be my first disappointment in life. I could get over it, no doubt, like the others."

"I daresay you would not mind it one bit?"

"Ask yourself that question, not *me*. I am tired of protestations, recriminations, botherations of all sorts. Either you trust me, or you *don't* trust me. Say which?"

She gave him one of the old looks. "I *do* trust you," said she earnestly; but added, with a sparkle in the blue eyes, "as far as I can see you—not an inch beyond."

"Then you judge of me by yourself!"

"Mr. Roy, if you came here to insult me, I must remind you there is a cab-stand in the next street."

"That is a broad hint, Lady Jane, and one I cannot refuse to take. I wish you good-morning."

His hat was in his hand, he had already made two strides, in high dudgeon, towards the door; but as he fired up she cooled down, and it was the Lady Jane of former days, of Kensington Gardens, and Hyde Park Corner, whose soft voice called him back with a plaintive little outcry.

"Mr. Roy, don't go!"

"What would you have?" he asked, with his hand on the door. "You attack me, you irritate me, you drive me mad with reproaches, you order me out of your house, and then you say,—Mr. Roy, don't go!"

"And Mr. Roy has pity, and stays!"

"Mr. Roy was always a fool about *somebody*, and gets no wiser, it appears, as he grows older. But it is really time to put an end to this kind of

thing between you and me. It does seem such utter folly for people situated as we are!"

"But we are *not* situated,—that is what makes me irritable, and anxious, and perhaps a little unreasonable. Admit, now, I have good reasons for being unreasonable."

"Because I can't drive a coach and six through the Laws of England! Because I can't set aside a hundred and fifty prior cases to bring forward my own grievance, and get it settled to-morrow—never mind it's being Sunday—out of hand! Yes, perhaps, from a lady's point of view, you *are* justified in being, as you say, unreasonable!"

"Now you are a good boy, and talk more like yourself, so I am beginning not to hate you quite so much. Therefore, I don't mind asking how we are getting on. Out of mere curiosity, of course."

"The very question I put to Sharpe yesterday. Out of mere curiosity, of course."

"Don't repeat my words, like a wicked parrot. It is nice of you to be anxious, and—and—impatient. What did Sharpe say?"

"The old story, 'More evidence.' These fellows never think they have evidence enough."

"Such nonsense! If a thing is jet-black you can't make it any blacker by inking it. They ought to set you free at once. I've always said so, and I am sure I am not prejudiced one way or the other!"

"Not the least, I should say—nobody less so! Well, they are going on, that is all I could get out of him; but the thing moves so slowly that it does put me out very much."

"Why?" with another of the looks.

"For many reasons. In the first place, I

abominate uncertainty; in the next, lawyers contrive to get through a great deal of money; and lastly, I am like a man in prison, I hunger and thirst to be free."

She seemed disappointed. "Free!" she repeated. "Is that all? And *shall* you be free, Mr. Roy, when this tiresome marriage of yours has been annulled?"

"I hope so. You don't think I have got another wife hidden away in a basket somewhere? Surely one has been trouble enough!"

She looked hurt, and her temper began to rise. The love-making of these two was seldom without such passages of arms, not always of courtesy, for sometimes they fought with point and edge *à outrance*.

"I should not be surprised even at that! I am learning some strange lessons. One of them teaches me that a woman only receives a stone in exchange when she gives her heart to a man. You had better have your stone back again. I don't want it any more."

"Then why did you tell me to stop just now when I was going away?"

"Why? Because I am a lady. Because I do not choose to turn a visitor out of my house. Because I am unmasking you every moment as you sit opposite me in that chair — you used always to sit on the sofa, but you hate to be near me now. Because, oh! Mr. Roy, because I am not a *man* to forget the memories of a lifetime in five minutes, to sacrifice justice, honour, and— and—and a loving woman's affection at a day's notice for a fresh fancy and a new face!"

Then her ladyship began to cry, and so scored several points in the game.

It was his turn to play, but she seemed to have left him very little on the table, and what are science, execution, and chalk into the bargain, without a break?

"The fancy is old, though the face is *not*," he answered recklessly, and, so to speak, taking his chance of a fluke. "You have no right to tax me with infidelity, and I hope you only do it to prove my truth. Suppose I were to turn round and say all these reproaches were a blind, a pretext for a quarrel, an excuse to get rid of me and take up with somebody else? What should you answer to *that*?"

"I should not answer at all! I should tell you it was absurd, impossible; that you were mad and bad, too, or such an idea could never have entered your head!"

"Lady Jane, I give in. Your logic beats one out of the field. Good Heavens! how wonderful is the mechanism of a woman's mind! Let us make a compact. Nothing shall ever tempt us into an argument after we are married!"

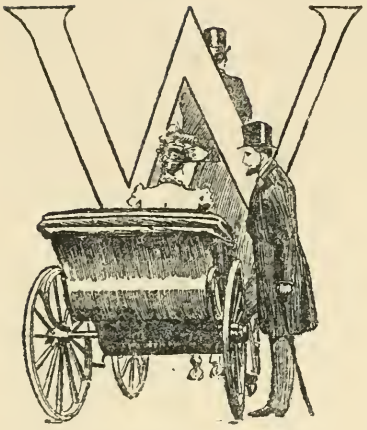
She turned her head away to hide the blush that mounted to her temples. "How do you know I shall marry you? I never said I *would*!"

"Do you mean that after all I have gone through, my sacrifices, my anxiety, my distress, and wear and tear of mind and body, you will throw me over at last? This is, indeed, a new experience of women and their ways! Well, Lady Jane, it is for you to decide. Be it so. I accept, and for the future"—

"Stop a moment, Mr. Roy. I never said I *wouldn't!*"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WEATHER-GAUGE



WE left Brail alongside of Miss Bruce's barouche, summoning to his manly heart the courage he felt oozing, notwithstanding their smart gloves, through the palms of his brawny hands. While he approached the charmer he felt dissatisfied with his hatter, tailor, and bootmaker, discovered that the weather had suddenly become several degrees warmer, and even experienced an ignoble desire to cut and run, all which unpleasant sensations vanished under the first glance of her loving eyes, that absorbed every feeling of self in a delightful consciousness of the presence that was life and sunshine and everything else to *him*.

How many times in the last fortnight had he rehearsed just such a scene, with questions, replies, rejoinders, the whole imaginary encounter in which one disputant has it all his own way. Yet he could find nothing better to say, while they shook hands,

than "How do you do, Miss Bruce? You are the last person I expected to find here!"

"Was that the reason you walked in this direction?" returned Hester, whose coolness returned with his obvious discomfiture. "I hope, Mr. Brail, there is such a thing as an agreeable surprise."

He coloured, he coughed, he shifted from one foot to the other. "Oh yes—very—of course," he stammered, but said to his own heart the while, "What has come to you? Here's a following wind, and a flood-tide, and I'm d——d if you can make any way at all!"

She marked his confusion, not without a little thrill of triumph, such as Pussy feels, no doubt, when the foolish mouse strays into reach. Then, shutting her parasol only to open it again, asked quickly, "Who was that you were walking with? I mean the lady you left to come to me."

"Mrs. John," he answered more boldly, as regaining confidence on neutral ground; "that is to say, her real name is Roy—Mrs. Roy. I think you must have known her at Warden Towers."

"Mrs. Roy!" repeated Hester, in shrill accents of delight. "Then I have lit on her at last. Know her! I should think I *did* know her! The sweetest, the kindest, the dearest thing alive, and the most beautiful too. Oh, Mr. Brail! Mr. Brail! I have found you out. No wonder your friends never see you, with such an attraction as that to keep you away. I suppose you walk together every day in the Park?"

"I'll take my solemn oath I never went out with her in my life before," replied Brail in great confusion and dismay. "We are at the same hotel, Miss Bruce; the fact is, she — well, she

keeps it, one may say, and, seeing her pining for fresh air, I proposed a cruise hereaway, Miss Bruce, and"—

"Keeps an hotel!" interrupted Hester. "What do you mean by an hotel? Why, she is a lady. We have dined with her in her own house at Royston Grange!"

"A lady she is, and first-class, too!" exclaimed the sailor. "But she keeps an hotel, Miss Bruce, all the same—you may take my word for it. Hold on a minute. You don't know her history, and I don't know that I've a right to tell it."

"I know more than you think. She has been maligned, and ill-used, too, unless I'm very much mistaken. I never believed evil of that woman. Nobody could, who looked in her face."

"It's not *your* way to think evil of anybody," said Brail, with honest admiration. "And if you come to talk of faces, you know, why"—

"Tell me all about her, Mr. Brail. I am really interested. Is she an old friend? Do you see much of her, and—and don't you think she is the most beautiful creature you ever beheld?"

"No, I don't! I can't help it, Miss Bruce; but there are plenty of ladies, that is to say, there is one lady, I admire ten times more than Mrs. John. What's the good? I'm only a poor lieutenant in the navy, and she is fit to be a queen. I wish"—

"What do you wish?"

"I wish I might tell her so, right off. Do you think, Miss Bruce, a girl has a right to be offended with a plain, honest fellow, because he looks up at her with the same sort of admiration a man has for the moon, as something belonging to heaven, unspeakably bright and glorious, but far out of reach?"

"Offended!"

"Because he would give an arm or a leg freely to do her the smallest service, or his head, for that matter, and thank her for taking it off his shoulders?"

"His head! Well, his head might be some use. What could she do with his arms and legs, if she had them? No, Mr. Brail; when you talk about heads, you come to the point, and I begin to see my way."

"Will you have mine? I'd cut it off this moment, and give it you freely."

"No, I will only ask you to lend it me. In plain English, Mr. Brail, you can do me a great kindness by simply using your wits."

"You know you're welcome to them, such as they are. Go ahead, Miss Bruce. Only, *you* give the orders, I'll take care they are obeyed."

"I want you to find out all you can about this unfortunate couple. I have set my heart on bringing them together again. Perhaps you don't know that Mr. Roy is actually trying to get a divorce."

"The swab!"

"What's a swab?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Bruce. I mean it's cruel, disgraceful, infamous! It will break that poor lady's heart."

"Do you think she cares for him so much?"

"I am sure she has some deep and bitter sorrow that she bears with the pluck of—of an angel, you know. I have observed it ever since we were paid off this last time. She is a different creature from what she used to be. I've never asked her plump, of course, but I can see she is as unhappy as she can stick."

"How oddly you talk when you're in earnest. Never mind, I like it. Now tell me exactly *who* she is, and what she is. We never knew for certain at Warden Towers."

"It's soon told. She is the niece of a dear old lady who keeps an hotel near the Strand. She has lived there ever since I went afloat as a boy, helping her aunt with the accounts and house-keeping. She is there now, back in her old ways, working like a nigger, but so altered I cannot bear to see it. So sad, so tired, so pale. She has hauled down her colours, Miss Bruce, as if she never meant to hoist them again."

"Poor dear! But she is staying with her aunt, you say? I was sure she would never do anything wrong, or even imprudent, and I hope, from my heart, Mr. Roy will be punished as he deserves. He gives out that she ran away from him, that she left her home with—with another gentleman. Mr. Brail, I'm ashamed to speak of such things, but if I was a *man*, I wouldn't rest till I had seen justice done."

"You are *not* a man, Miss Bruce, happily for the credit of the ladies, but I am—at least I'm a pretty good imitation, and, as I said before, there is nothing you can tell me to do I won't have a try at, blow high, blow low."

"Do you know Lord Fitzowen?"

Mr. Brail stared. The question seemed irrelevant, and in his heart of hearts he rather mistrusted the influence of that voluble nobleman with the young lady he adored. "Yes," he said, "I know him well enough. Why?"

"Do you consider him a what-d'ye-call-it?—a swab?"

"Certainly not. I believe he is a very good fellow, and I know he is a gentleman."

"Then you don't believe him a likely person to have placed Mrs. Roy in a false position by his attentions? You will wonder, Mr. Brail, at my entering on such a topic, but I am no longer a girl. I shall be twenty-four my next birthday, and one can't help hearing people talk. I daresay you think I ought to sit with my mouth screwed up, and pretend to know nothing!"

"I am not the best judge in *your* case," answered the wily lieutenant. "You would have to be a long way out of your reckoning, Miss Bruce, before I could admit you were wrong."

"Thank you! I like people to believe in me. Well, then, about Lord Fitzowen? Does he often call on Mrs. Roy at this hotel where you all seem to be living together in one family?"

"Never by the remotest chance. I am sure of it, for I must have seen him."

"Then if it is not Lord Fitzowen, do you think there can be anybody else?"

"Who *should* there be? Mrs. John — we always call her Mrs. John — never sees a soul except on business. She sits in a glass case like the cook's galley, with a pen in her hand, from morning till night. I had to ask a dozen times before I could get her out for a walk to-day."

"And you could swear to this?"

"If I tell *you* so, of course I could swear to it. My word is as good as my bond—better, for that matter—and I don't know why it should be worse than my oath!"

Hester clapped her hands so gaily as to startle her coachman on the box out of his peaceful doze. "Then we shall beat them!" she exclaimed.

"We shall take the wind out of their sails. We have got the—the"—

"Weather-gauge?"

"The weather-gauge! Exactly! Just what I meant. Mr. Brail, I wish you would teach me some more of your sea-terms, they always express what I want to say."

He looked immensely delighted, but our friend had learned navigation as well as seamanship, and saw his way to a successful voyage from a fresh departure, as it were, and on a different course. There was more credit to be obtained, he thought, by doing her bidding while still a free agent; after accomplishing her orders to the letter, he could come confidently for a reward, that in the meantime must be rather less than promised, rather more than understood.

"It is very good of you not to laugh at me," said he humbly. "A man cannot get rid of his seafaring ways and expressions so easily as he slips out of uniform to go ashore. Well, Miss Bruce, when you want me, sing out. I shall soon be alongside."

"Then I'll sing out now; but not loud enough for the servants to hear. This is a delicate business to undertake, and a difficult, but I think you have a good head on your shoulders, and a good heart in your—well, wherever a man's heart is supposed to be."

"I know where mine is. Never mind. Go ahead."

"You shall have your sailing instructions. That is right, is it not? But of course they must be modified by circumstances, and a good deal is left to your discretion."

"I understand, a sort of roving commission."

"Call it what you like. I don't think I shall be very hard upon you, so long as you do your duty. In the first place, you must get introduced to Mr. Roy. I can help you so far. Then you must make friends with him. You will have to manage that for yourself."

"Can't you let me off the making friends? I couldn't shake hands with a man who has behaved so like a scoundrel."

"You may trust to me. He is not such a—what is it?—not such a *swab* as you seem to think. He will listen to reason if he hears it from an unprejudiced person who leans to neither side. *You* are that unprejudiced person. What earthly reason *can* you have for interesting yourself in Mrs. Roy?"

"Does he not know she is a friend of *yours*?"

Miss Bruce blushed crimson. The sailor was not sure whether he had made a point or a blunder.

"That need not enlighten him," proceeded the young lady. "*You* are a friend of mine, and of papa's, but how should Mr. Roy have learned that interesting fact? People in London only make themselves acquainted with things which are *not*. Do as I tell you, and all will come right."

"Then tell me what to do."

"When Mr. Roy and you have dined together once or twice, and smoked a dozen cigars, you will become what gentlemen call great friends. Then you will say to him, 'My dear fellow, I hope you believe I would do you a turn if I could.'"

Brail stared. Was there nothing she didn't know, nothing she couldn't do? Why, she

would learn to command an ironclad in a week!

"He will answer, 'I am sure you would. One expects no less from a true friend,'" continued Hester, with a comical imitation of the male voice and manner that plunged her victim fathoms deeper in love than ever. "'When I want you I'll look you up.' Then you must say, 'You want me now. You are getting into an awful mess. Have another cigar. I am going to tell you something you ought to know—it's about Mrs. Roy!' He will probably look and feel very angry, but he won't have anything to say at a moment's notice, and while he is trying to think of an answer you can go on. 'I happen to have heard a great deal of that lady since your differences. She has been living with her aunt in the strictest seclusion. She is never visited by a soul, and you have no more chance of getting a divorce than I have of being Archbishop of Canterbury.' That's strong enough, I think!" concluded Miss Hester, opening her parasol with a jerk to point this triumphant peroration.

"And if I can get so far before he heaves a glass of grog in my face, I shall have done a day's duty and earned a day's pay," said the sailor, contemplating his teacher with an expression of blended adoration and amusement.

"A day's duty," repeated Hester, "deserves a day's pay. Good gracious, Mr. Brail! how long do you think we have been chattering here?"

"Five minutes."

"Five-and-forty, more likely! Look at my watch. Papa will think I am lost. I *must* go now—Mr. Brail, good-bye."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"Oh! not for a long time." (His face fell.) "Not to-morrow, certainly." (It brightened again.)

"The day after, then?"

"No, I think not, unless we go to the Horticultural."

"You *will* go to the Horticultural?"

"Not before five o'clock. Please tell them to drive on, Mr. Brail. Once more, good-bye."

The horses were already in motion, the servants' backs were turned, nobody was looking; he bent over the slender gloved hand she gave him, and pressed it to his lips.

His heart was stout, but it thrilled; his brain steady, but it swam. When he awoke out of his ecstasy, the carriage was a quarter of a mile off, and she turned her head, for the smallest fraction of a second, to give him a last look.

"I've done it!" said Brail, walking rapturously off towards Kensington Gardens, for in his supreme delight he had lost "his bearings," as he called them, and all knowledge of where he was. "She can't make any mistake now, and if it didn't seem *impossible*, I should say she meant me to try. She's not a girl to play fast and loose with a man. Quite different! I've seen them with their heads all round the compass, so as no seamanship could bring them to, but she's not one of that sort. I believe in her like my Bible. The weather-gauge, indeed! How prettily she said it! Perhaps I'll have the weather-gauge myself one of these days, and tow you into port, my beauty, with a ring and a parson, and a whole fleet of bridesmaids, as happy as a king. Ah! there's nothing like it, when you're spliced to such a duck as that! Talk of money, rank, fashion! Rubbish! They're not

worth a hank of rotten yarn! Give me a merry heart, a good conscience,

> And the wind that blows,
> And the ship that goes,
> And the lass that loves a sailor!"

CHAPTER XXX

WATCH AND WATCH

IT is not to be supposed that Lord Fitzowen's red-waistcoated emissary failed in the task assigned him. He came to demand his recompense, furnishing Nelly's full name and address within an hour of his first start, and hung about Lord Fitzowen's residence till that nobleman should return to dress for dinner, contentedly enough; wishing, indeed, that all the jobs he took in hand were as easy of accomplishment, and as sure to be well paid.

Corner Hotel, Corner Street, Strand. Surely no locality could be less calculated to screen a lady from pursuit! Why not take a room there at once, disguised as a bagman—with such a red wig and sample of hardware as should defy recognition, not to resume his real character until assured of forgiveness and success? The idea, though tempting, was too theatrical, and he dismissed it with regret. Such an adventure would have suited his versatile genius, no doubt, but seemed repugnant to good taste. Moreover, Fitz felt conscious not only of admiration for Mrs. Roy, but also of profound respect. This it was that distinguished the present from all his past attachments, and caused him to fear that he must be very far gone indeed.

So he was content to wait a day or two, and

then despatched a bouquet of liberal dimensions, addressed to Mrs. Roy. Nelly, believing simply enough that this floral offering was a gallantry from Brail, thanked him accordingly, and it was only after the sailor's energetic disavowal she suspected the real offender. But what was the use? she could not send them back; the flowers were very beautiful, bringing with them odours of summer, almost gleams of sunshine, into the cook's galley, as the lieutenant called it, where she cast up her bills.

"They're lovely, my dear, whoever sent them," protested her aunt. "Flowers isn't like ornaments, Nelly; they're to be had for the gathering. A young woman needn't be ashamed to accept of flowers, come from where they will, and a young man wouldn't offer flowers as didn't mean honest and honourable. If it was a bracelet now, or a pair of gold earrings, they'd have to go back next post. I've done it myself, scores of times; but when they come with a nosegay, thank ye kindly, says I, and you're welcome to a nosegay from me, if you look for anything in return!"

Thus it fell out that when Lord Fitzowen summoned courage to call in person at the Corner Hotel, he found his bouquet set in a jug of water, propped by two ledgers on her writing-table, under Nelly's very nose. Any encouragement thus afforded seemed, however, sufficiently counteracted by that lady's greeting, which was of the coldest and most reserved. Putting her lips to an orifice in the wall that communicated by some mysterious pipe with the basement, she summoned a flippant waiter to assist at the interview, ignoring sternly the possibility that his lordship could have called for any purpose less business-like than that of

securing rooms. Fitz was not easily defeated; but it must be confessed this masterly manœuvre placed him at considerable disadvantage. His frank, open nature did him better service than any amount of artifice.

"Forgive me," he said, lifting his hat; "I only ventured to intrude because, having discovered your address by accident, I wanted to finish something I forgot to say the last time we met."

Nelly had turned very pale, but her lip was steady and her voice firm while she answered, "I require no apology. I thought my wishes would have had greater weight. I am sorry to find I am mistaken. I conclude there is nothing more to be said."

The waiter stared, and whisked his napkin. Lord Fitzowen, trying to intimate with his eye that it would be well if this functionary were dismissed, preserved an awkward silence; while Mrs. John did a sum in addition, and did it wrong.

"Do you wish to see my aunt?" she said at last, looking up with a gravity which proved too much for her visitor.

For all his romance, volatile Fitz was keenly alive to the ludicrous, and he fairly burst into a laugh.

His mirth seemed contagious; Nelly could not forbear smiling, though resolved none the less to remain on her defence.

"Will you introduce me to your aunt?" he exclaimed. "I should be so delighted. I want to know the whole family."

"It is all very well to laugh," replied Mrs. John, resuming her gravity; "but I should have thought *you* the last person in the world to take unfair advantage of anyone — particularly of the

unhappy. Do not force me to confess I was mistaken."

"You don't mean I must never come and see you at all?" said his lordship ruefully. "I only ask to be of service: I had no time to tell you so the other day. I would run your errands, fetch and carry for you like a dog!"

"I don't want a dog," she answered; "and I have nothing to fetch and carry."

"But I may send you some more flowers, at anyrate? After all, they are only vegetables. There can be no objection to flowers."

"Neither flowers nor vegetables. I ought to have thanked you for these. But no more; and good-bye!"

So his lordship had nothing for it but to walk out, baffled, defeated, more enthralled than ever, and gathering what consolation he could from his late rebuff.

"At least," he thought, "she seemed to like the flowers. That must mean she will forgive me for sending more. What on earth made her have the waiter up? I don't know why one should mind waiters; they must hear and see all sorts of things. A waiter is really no more protection than a tooth-pick! Yes, I must be patient. In a week, or perhaps less, I might call again. I can excuse myself by urging that she would not listen to me to-day. By degrees she will get used to it, and in time she will let me sit in that glass case with her; of course, under surveillance of the aunt, and eventually, perhaps, only of the waiter. I can square *him*. It will be a long business, but I shouldn't mind that, if I thought she would care for me at last. It's uphill work—I have made lamentably slow progress; yet I cannot help flattering

myself I got the thin end of the wedge in to-day!"

Thus ruminated his lordship, under the erroneous impression that it is possible to judge of one woman by another, or that experience and analogy are of the slightest assistance in predicating the turns of the female mind; and while so ruminating, returned, instinctively, the salute of that red-waistcoated messenger whom he so often employed. As Red-waistcoat looked after the nobleman with an admiring shake of the head, he was accosted by a person wearing a shabby suit of black, like an undertaker in difficulties, who pressed a sixpence into his willing palm.

"What's this for?" asked the recipient, at once suspecting "something up."

"Why, you see, my man, I'm from the country."

"You looks like it," interpolated Red-waistcoat.

"From the country," continued the other, indifferent to irony. "Comed up for the Horse Show; and I want to know some of the tip-toppers, if it's only by sight, so as to talk of them when I gets home."

"Vell?"

"Now, that is a real, natural swell, I'm sure of it, as you touched your hat to just now. Would you mind obliging me with his name?"

"Vich?"

"The young gentleman in a blue surtout, with his hat a one side."

"Wot! don't you know *'im*?"

"No. Who is he?"

"Who is he? Why, Captain Bull. That's who *he* is! I thought as everybody knowed Captain Bull!"

And Red-waistcoat, true to his salt, having mistrusted this country-bred inquirer from the first, disappeared down a by-street to melt his late gratuity in gin.

The shabby man smiled, shook his head, and walked on. "It's a good name," he said to himself, "a very good travelling name, is Captain Bull. I might find it handy some of these days in my own way of business. So his lordship calls himself Captain Bull, does he, when he takes his little walks and plays his little game at this here end of the Strand? Let's see now. The day before yesterday a nosegay of flowers, not far short of a guinea's worth, I'll wager; to-day a visit under a false name; to-morrow?—to-morrow will be an off-day, I guess. Spell of work, spell of rest—that's about the size of it with these here upper-crusts. And next week, maybe, she'll drive out with him in a hired brougham, or what-not. I think I see my way to put the puzzle together, piecing it in, bit by bit, till every joint fits exact, smooth, and even as the palm of your hand. Then I goes to my employer and draws my ten quid, and perhaps a couple more for luck. Yes, I don't think I laid out that sixpence so badly. For a Londoner, and a gutter-bred one, this chap in a red weskit seems what I call a trifle *soft*."

Not so soft as the shabby person supposed. Red-waistcoat, who had swept a crossing in St. James's Street, hung about Tattersall's yard, held their horses for Members of both Houses at Westminster, and when Parliament was not sitting had spent one recess on plain fare and regular exercise at Brixton, was about as sharp a blade as can be turned out by the hard grindstone of lower London life. He saw through the would-be countryman

at a glance, detected the detective by his boots—*ex pede Herculem*—and making sure he was not followed, ran like a lamplighter through certain by-streets to Lord Fitzowen's house, where his knowledge of human nature told him his lordship would return for revisal of his toilet after a visit to his lady-love in the Strand.

He arrived simultaneously with that nobleman, and passed into the hall by aid of the owner's latch-key.

"Well, Jack, what's up now?" asked Fitzowen, flinging his umbrella with a clatter into the stand.

"You're watched, my lord!" was the answer. "I made bold to come on here at once, and give your lordship the office. When a man *knows* as he's watched there ain't no danger, like when a man *knows* as he's drunk!"

"How did you find it out, Jack?"

"Bless ye, my lord! I hadn't no call to go a-finding of it out; the cove jumped slap into my mouth. 'Who's that gent?' says he, when I lifted my 'at to your lordship, which you returned polite. I warn't a-goin' to give *him* the tip, my lord, not if I know'd it. I'm not such a flat."

"Do you think he had been following me long?"

"Best part of an hour, my lord. I see him before, when your lordship passed down Pall Mall. I couldn't be mistaken, a-cause of his boots. He ain't a bobby, my lord—you've no call to be afraid of that; but he's as bad, if not worse."

"You'd know him again, I suppose?"

"Anywheres, my lord. He couldn't deceive *me*, not if I was to drop on to him in a church."

"Then keep a sharp look-out. If you see that

he tracks me regularly, get into conversation with him and find out his employer, if you can."

"Let me alone, my lord. I'll soon know wot he's up to. Good-day, my lord. It's uncommon hot this afternoon."

"Are you thirsty, Jack?"

"Always dry, my lord, begging your lordship's pardon."

"Then go and wet your whistle with that, and don't come here again till you've got something to tell me I didn't know before."

Red-waistcoat, pocketing a handsome gratuity, went his way rejoicing, while Lord Fitzowen, dressing leisurely for an afternoon ride, meditated on Mrs. Roy's deep grey eyes, and the false position in which he had placed both her and himself.

Watched! Had it indeed come to this? He could depend on Red-waistcoat; the fellow was sharp as a needle, and familiar with every kind of intrigue, even in phases of life far higher than his own. There was no likelihood of his being mistaken, and it seemed probable that, for some reason as yet unexplained, the attachment he had allowed himself to cherish for this deserted wife was now suspected by her husband. There would be an action at law, a show-up, a general row, and he was to be made the scapegoat! What then? Why, Mr. Roy was playing into his very hands. He desired nothing better. Outraged, insulted, compromised by the man who ought to have protected her, found guilty by the verdict of society, before trial and without evidence, her good name irretrievably tarnished as thus connected with his own, Nelly would be more or less than woman if she refused the only shelter left, his love, his protection, and his home. They would go abroad at

once. How delightful! "The world forgetting, by the world forgot." Would find some beautiful nook in Germany, Switzerland, the Italian Alps, no matter where, to furnish the first example of a pair who, having set the decencies of life at defiance, could make each other happy as the day is long! Would he tire of her at last? No, no; a thousand times no. And all the while, with masculine self-sufficiency, he never dreamed of speculating, would she tire of him?

Pending this final catastrophe, distant enough as yet, except in Lord Fitzowen's vivid imagination, Mr. Roy paid frequent visits to Lincoln's Inn, returning therefrom, day by day, with an increasing depression of spirits that Lady Jane taxed all her energies to dispel. It vexed her not a little to see the man whom she now began to consider personal property in no way elevated by his prospects—grave, silent, even morose, showing unaccountable dislike to the payment or acceptance of those little attentions by which women set such store.

"I can't think what's the matter with you!" exclaimed her ladyship, fairly out of patience with his continued despondency. "If it wasn't so bad a compliment to myself, and I didn't know it must be impossible, I should say you were in love with that odious wife of yours all the time!"

CHAPTER XXXI

WORN TO A THREAD

WHO has not sympathised with Madame de Maintenon when, contrasting the solemn splendour of her maturity with the poverty, dependence, and light-heartedness of former days, she deplored her dreary task—"to amuse a king no longer capable of amusement"? There was probably as little resemblance between Louis the Great and Scarron as between the late Mr. de Banier and John Roy, yet could Lady Jane at this period of her widowhood fully appreciate the uphill work imposed on that discreet personage who succeeded so skilfully in combining the influence of a king's favourite with the authority of a king's wife. Madame Scarron endured the penance a good many years. Lady Jane found it irksome in a very few weeks. Nevertheless, women will make great sacrifices rather than abate one inch of dominion, and her ladyship, though she hated both, was more averse to being baffled than bored.

The last conquest, too, when it comes at the end of a long list, seems only more valuable because it *is* the last. There is a great rush for tickets when the lottery is about to close, and with all its uncertainty, all its variety, all its whirl of chance and change, no doubt the finish seems the most exciting part of a race.

WORN TO A THREAD

It is when youth is slipping away that women cling to it with most tenacious grasp; and oh! ye fickle swains, who pass like the bee from flower to flower, I beseech you have some consideration for those over-blown roses, from which the petals already begin to fall. Tempting are they, and fragrant in their rich maturity, but remember, if you gather you are bound to wear them till nothing is left but the stalk!

A damsel's broken heart can be put together again by your successor as good as new—or very nearly—and is sometimes, indeed, all the sounder and healthier for its ordeal. The chances of the table are still open to a player who has but lost her first venture in the game. Far different is it with the matron burning to retrieve a ruined fortune on this, her last bold stake. If luck fails her, there is no recovery—neither *re fait* nor *après* can avail; she must walk out beggared and desperate into the night. Can we blame her that she summons all her energy, all her artifice, all her courage, and would fain supplement skill with something like cheating, to counteract the adverse chances of the deal? That inexorable *rien ne va plus* must always be a sentence of doom to the sanguine, impulsive, and insatiable sex, who enter life persuaded they have a prescriptive right to its richest prizes, and if they must leave it without attaining the objects of their ambition, declare loudly they have suffered injustice from gods and men.

Lady Jane, in so far a Juliet that she would have her Romeo stray—

> No farther than a wanton's bird,
> Who lets it hop a little from her hand,
> Like a poor prisoner in its twisted gyves,
> And with a silk thread plucks it back again,
> So loving-jealous of its liberty—

did by no means approve of the change that day by day was making a turbulent vassal out of an obedient slave. Mr. Roy seemed adamant to smiles and tears alike. Voluble reproaches and silent sulks were equally unavailing. As a last resource she tried hysterics, once only, and never again, since they nearly drove him away for good and all. "I must leave off," thought her ladyship, "where I ought to have begun. To keep him amused is the only chance of tiding over this dreadful interval, and retaining my hold on his affections. He must be made to feel he cannot do without me. Men are sad cowards in their dread of being bored. If I can find him a fresh distraction every day, and the days do not outlast the distractions, I shall win. After we are married, my friend, it will be *my* turn, and you will find yourself nicely mistaken if you think you are to go on as you do now!" So she sought out every diversion she could think of—plays, operas, concerts, flower-shows, and bazaars, till from Alexandra Park to the Crystal Palace there was hardly a place of amusement, frequented by the respectable classes, at which she had not yawned out her money's worth in company with Mr. Roy.

She was hard put to it for a pastime when she made the following proposal over her usual afternoon tea.

"Will you take me somewhere to-night?"

His face expressed no inordinate gratification. She felt vexed with herself and him to feel that he would rather stay and smoke peacefully at his club.

"How can you go anywhere to-night?" was the uncourteous rejoinder. "I thought you dined with your uncle, the bishop?"

"So I do; and he ought to be burnt for not

asking you to meet me. Never mind, I shall get away early. And you?"

"I am engaged to dine with a man-party."

"You're sure it's a man-party?"

"Quite sure. A house-dinner at a club, to meet rather a distinguished individual—one of the fellows who went to look for the North Pole."

"How nice! I declare I envy you! Can't you bring him here? Do you know him well?"

"I didn't know him at all two days ago, but we are rather allies already. I like him very much. He seems a straightforward, sensible fellow, without the slighest self-conceit."

"What's his name?"

"Brail. A lieutenant in the navy."

"I can tell you all about him. He's perpetually dangling after that pert, forward Miss Bruce — the girl *you* think so good-looking. I wonder how poor old twaddling Sir Hector allows it!"

"Miss Bruce! How you ladies pick up gossip! Now I should have thought Brail had more sense than to dangle after any woman, if she was as beautiful as an angel."

"Say as wicked as a fiend! That is what you gentlemen like. I declare it almost puts one out of conceit with being good, to see the sort of people that get on in this modern Babylon."

"Then why don't you leave off?"

She looked at him reproachfully. Nor, I am bound to admit, was such a remark, addressed to a lady with whom he had contracted a tacit engagement, in the best taste; but Roy, placed in a false position and goaded by the stings of conscience, had become of late like a baited bull, pushing and goring on all sides without scruple or remorse.

Lady Jane swallowed down the lump that rose in her throat, and, being a skilful debater, moved the previous question with assumed calmness—"Shall you get away from your dinner by eleven?"

"How can I tell? What do you want me to do at eleven?"

"What I want you to do every hour of the day. Give me the pleasure of your society. Now *do* be a dear old thing for once. Limit yourself to a cigarette after dinner, and at eleven exactly I will call for you in the brougham—there!"

"*Après?*"

"I'll take you to a *séance*."

"What's a *séance*?"

"I haven't an idea. I never went to one. But I think it must be rather nice. We sit in the dark, you know, and hold each other's hands. I believe you must on no account let go."

"Why? What would happen?"

"Oh! something very dreadful. *Somebody* would come up, I fancy, and insist on joining the circle—perhaps take the youngest lady in the company down with him. No, you must promise not to let go!"

"It sounds great nonsense, but I've no objection to holding on. Is that all we do?"

"That's only a beginning. If we preserve the circle unbroken, and keep on wishing—(it's not like our own world, you know: there's great virtue in wishing)—we shall get—what did Lady Pandora call it?—a manifestation!"

"That ought to be something startling. Did she explain what it means?"

"Not exactly. But she said the spirits would come into the room and answer questions. I should like to ask a good many."

"Lady Jane, have you ever read 'Swedenborg'?"

"No."

"Did you ever hear of him?"

"I think I remember the name. Wasn't he a quack doctor or something?"

"He was a man of deep thought and powerful imagination. A hundred years ago he founded the religion, or belief, or whatever you like to call it, that idle people are taking up to-day."

"Only think!"

"He saw visions, and dreamed dreams; heard the music of the spheres played in good time and tune, ascended to the seventh heaven in a trance, and—and came down again not much wiser than he went up."

"How clever of you to know! And what became of him? Of course he's dead."

"Yes, he's dead, like anybody else. One says of him now, that he was 'a very remarkable man!' It commits one to nothing."

"But what do *you* think?"

"The many consider him a madman, the few a prophet. It does not follow that because the minority is ridiculously small, it must therefore be in the wrong."

"Mr. Roy, I believe you are a spiritualist! Now you *must* come to-night."

"Lady Jane, I am neither spiritualist nor materialist. I cannot judge off-hand, when matters lie so completely beyond the range of ordinary experience and our normal reasoning powers. The man who tells me such and such things are impossible has usually no better argument, when you press him hard, than *because* they are impossible, and I find cannot explain much of the ordinary

process of physical nature, far less the mysterious operations of the mind. We have still a great deal to learn about mesmerism, magnetism, miracles, scriptural and historical, our misgivings, presentiments, hopes, and fears—above all, our sympathies, aversions, and personal influence on each other."

"I know I couldn't sleep with a cat in the room, and I'm afraid of a blackbeetle," observed Lady Jane, who found some difficulty in keeping her mind fixed on any one subject for five consecutive minutes.

"Exactly; but why?"

"Because I can't bear them! Surely that's reason enough."

"And do you believe in ghosts?"

"Of course I don't! I wouldn't live in a haunted house, though, for any money you could offer."

"That's very plucky! But again, why?"

"Oh, I've heard such stories. Somebody I met at dinner only the other day—I think it was Lord Fitzowen—told me he slept in the Gallery at Shadelands, one Ascot week, and nothing would tempt him to pass a night there again."

"Really! What did he see?"

"Oh, I don't know that he saw anything. You can't *see* ghosts, I fancy, but there were all sorts of strange noises; his pillow was pulled from under his head, the chairs and tables moved about the room, and his water-jug was upset—but he thinks he did that himself. I assure you, his account of it made my blood run cold."

"Shadelands! Is that the house where a man stamped a baby into the fire with his boots?"

"No, no. The horrors you are thinking of

happened the other side of the county. I believe, though, they are quite true. Shadelands is the place where an old man in a chintz dressing-gown comes into your room just before daybreak, pokes his face through the curtains at the foot of your bed, and tries to confess something, but nobody has yet made out what."

"You say Fitzowen didn't see him?"

"No, he didn't *see* him, but he felt sure the old man was in the room!"

"Did he see anybody who *had* seen him?"

"Oh, if you don't believe it, of course it's no use discussing the subject. I can't suppose Lord Fitzowen would assert what wasn't true!"

"I'm not so sure of that. There is such a thing as poking fun, even at the lady you take down to dinner. But I am more credulous than you think. I don't see why I should not believe in your old man."

"I am glad you haven't said I tell stories too. Then you think the ghost in the chintz dressing-gown"—

"Stop! I draw the line at dressing-gowns. Ghosts, as many as you please—I can swallow them by scores; but where do they get their clothes?"

"That's not at all a nice joke. Of course, even ghosts have a sense of decency. They couldn't meet one without—without something on. Now I see you are turning the whole subject into ridicule, and I think it very unkind."

"But you don't believe in them yourself; you said so at first."

"That has nothing to do with it. One ought not to make light of such serious topics. It's like turning religion into ridicule. Besides, there must

be something strange about this spirit-rapping, if all Lady Pandora tells me is true."

"Then in your creed the ghosts and the spirits are separate articles of belief?"

"Of course; they have nothing whatever to do with each other. Ghosts are—well, I don't exactly know *what* ghosts are. At least, I can't explain; but the spirits give a very clear account of themselves—they seem to conceal nothing."

"Still, I hope they are dressed!"

"Beautifully dressed, and in the most expensive things. Of course, you can't *see* their dresses in the dark."

"Then how do you know?"

"That is what I asked Lady Pandora, because it does seem most interesting to learn what one wears in the other world, and she said that in a good manifestation, with a powerful medium—Do you know what a medium is?"

"Not in the least; do *you*?"

"Never mind, it would take too long to explain. Well, with a powerful medium and under favourable conditions (for the spirits are very capricious, she tells me—worse than men and women—at least, worse than women), when you have sat and wished hard for an hour or so, there comes a faint gleam of light—very pretty pale violet colour, and it dances about the room like a will-o'-the-wisp, or the corpse-lights in a churchyard. Then, if you are not too frightened, you must keep your eyes fixed on it till you see something."

"Has Lady Pandora seen something?"

"No, but Mrs. Eccleston has. She's almost a medium, and knows the names of nearly half a dozen spirits."

"And what did Mrs. Eccleston see?"

"Well, she told Lady Pandora that the light grew so vivid it dazzled her eyes; but after a few minutes, she made out a woman's face, pale, and rather pretty, only sad, floating about, as she described it, in the rise and fall of the flame. Its hair was dark, and round its forehead it had bound a transparent gauze veil with spangles of gold. The rest of the figure was invisible, all but a thin white hand that held a flower. The medium knew this spirit quite well, and held a long conversation with it."

"Did Lady Pandora tell you what they talked about?"

"Oh yes! The medium asked her if she was happy, and she answered, through the medium, of course, that she was not, but she hoped to be much happier after a little while, as she was going to be transferred to another sphere. Did she feel uncomfortable where she was placed at present? No; but she didn't like it, and would be glad when removed. Mrs. Eccleston says she always gives the same answer, and is a very unsatisfactory spirit to converse with. She wouldn't tell them any more, but faded gradually away, after dropping the flower gently on the table—that is the most extraordinary part of the whole thing!"

"And what became of the flower? I should like to have had it to keep."

"So would Lady Pandora. But when she asked for it, unfortunately the medium had taken it away. Now, Mr. Roy, how do you get over such testimony as this? But I won't ask you to take my word. Seeing is believing. Come with me to-night, and judge for yourself."

He looked grave and pondered. "I, too," said he, "should like to ask the spirits a few questions

Yes, Lady Jane, if you are good enough to call for me, I will be ready at eleven to-night."

He took himself off to dress for dinner, and Lady Jane looked at the clock—half-past six. He couldn't be going to dine till eight, and, so far as her experience served her, a man's toilet ought not to take more than five-and-twenty minutes—poor De Banier accomplished his in ten. On these matters of domestic detail a widow is not to be deceived. Young ladies may be put off with excuses, but the matron knows her rights, and exacts her claim in full. Could he be going to see somebody else? The thought so stung Lady Jane that she started from her chair and laid her hand on the bell. A vague idea crossed her mind of following in a cab to make sure of the worst, but it faded quickly as it rose, and she resolved to bear and forbear patiently, stubbornly if necessary, for the next few weeks, smothering reproaches and postponing refusals, till a crowning victory should bring him into subjection for life. The cord that secured her captive was sadly worn and frayed, it seemed only to hold by a thread, requiring the lightest finger, the nicest skill, lest it should part and set him free.

There was no question of coercion; she must turn and lead, and coax him in the right direction, as a skilful angler guides the gudgeon ashore, in spite of weeds and obstructions, wind and weather, light tackle, and a heavy fish.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE STALLED OX

A HOUSE-DINNER at a good club! The very words carry a flavour of clear turtle and dry champagne, still hock, forced strawberries, and the utmost efforts of a cook who knows that his skill will be appreciated by a judicious committee of his own sex, unalloyed with that mixture of ladies which diverts attention from the serious business of mankind, about nine p.m. Mr. Roy, having lately had the benefit of feminine society, thought he should very much enjoy a jolly little party composed exclusively of men, and discharged his hansom cab at the club steps with something of a boy's feelings who resolves to make the most of his playtime between the hours of school. With the originator of this feast we have nothing to do, save to accord him the tribute of admiration due to one whose primary object in life is to feed his friends plentifully and well. He was, perhaps, the best judge of good-living in London; could tell you where the most perfect dinners were to be had in every capital of Europe, discriminating between the dishes to order at a restaurant, and those to partake of at an ambassador's; was cunning in wines, experienced in sauces, and might be trusted with a bill of fare in any part of the civilised world.

It is only justice to add that this gentleman was

also skilled in the art of sending out his invitations, bringing people together who liked to meet, and was seldom guilty of such a solecism as to ask men to the same table who were not on cordial terms.

However familiar he may be with its banks and surface, I am told that it takes a waterman many long years thoroughly to know the eddies and under-currents of the Thames. It is the same in that great City which is washed, without being cleaned, by the fine old river. You may have the latest gossip, jests, and scandal at your fingers' ends, yet find it impossible to keep pace with the shifting ramifications of London life. Births, deaths, or marriages make bitter enemies to-day of those who were fast friends last week, and in a society like ours, of which the female element forms so important a part, it is impossible to foretell what an hour may bring forth. Mr. Roy, arriving as a waiter announced dinner, did not calculate on finding that one of the party assembled in honour of his new friend, Mr. Brail, was his old friend, Lord Fitzowen!

In those melodramatic times painted by romance, which I firmly believe never existed in reality, such meetings are described as replete with action and event. "Ha! traitor!" exclaims one gallant, baring his blade. "Have I found thee, O mine enemy!" replies the other, throwing away his scabbard. The wicked rapiers glide, and grate, and gleam, and all the rest of it, till after a fixed number of stamps and passes down goes Mercutio, with a sufficient hole in his side, and off swaggers Tybalt, calling for a stoup of wine in such reprehensible language as seems appropriate to a costume of doublet and hose.

We who wear coats and pantaloons can have

no such expeditious redress. We bite our thumbs in a lawyer's office rather than in the open street, and must needs extort reparation—not so speedy, but perhaps more secure—in those Inns of Court which were really fields when our fathers sought them to salve wounded honour with hot lead or cold steel. But in the meantime, if our bitterest enemy has the face to accost us politely in public we feel compelled to return his greeting, value for value, and ask after his health with assumed interest, while in our secret hearts we wish he was dead, and worse!

The last time they met in a club, Lord Fitzowen addressed Mr. Roy with an open frankness that could not but disarm suspicion. Things had changed since then in fact, if not in intention, and what ought he to do now? It was a difficult question. "I have no right to cut a man because I am in love with his wife," thought his lordship, "and yet one can't be cordial with a fellow who has behaved so badly to the sweetest woman in the universe! Hang it! I wish I hadn't come; but as I *am* here, I suppose I had better say, How d'ye do? without shaking hands!" So he adopted a middle course, which is seldom a good plan, and the two men exchanged a cold, constrained salute, almost tantamount to a declaration of war.

It relieved Mr. Roy, nevertheless, from a dilemma of his own. He too had been wondering whether he ought to destroy the whole hilarity of the party by cutting Lord Fitzowen dead, or whether, under protest as it were, and for one night only, he should meet him like any other friend, and leave the world to be enlightened by such ulterior proceedings as would make it impossible for them ever to speak again. His lordship's

curt greeting, therefore, gave him his cue, and nobody perhaps except Brail, whose perceptions were sharpened by self-interest, observed anything peculiar in the manner of these two men, sitting in apparent amity, with three feet of tablecloth between them, which one, if not both, would fain have exchanged for twelve paces of level ground near a frontier town.

But hostility, however rancorous, is seldom quite proof against the effects of good cheer. Before dinner was half through, and when the champagne had been round thrice, Brail felt satisfied there would be no difficulty in keeping the peace—nay, by the time chartreuse had succeeded a macédoine flavoured with maraschino, Fitz became so placable that he began to think "Roy wasn't half a bad fellow after all, and what a pity the whole lot couldn't live amicably together, while he made love to Mrs. Roy just the same!" Such ethics, however, only belong to that period of complete satisfaction which precedes the arrival of cheese. After helping himself to claret his lordship grew more practical, and returned to the regions of common sense.

The lieutenant was the only person who felt glad when dinner came to an end. The rest had been happy enough, and even the two enemies seemed far less occupied with each other than with the good fare; but Brail, having an object of his own in view, found himself acting a part rather than speaking out in his proper character, a process most distasteful to the frank-hearted sailor. Conversation during the repast naturally turned on his recent expedition, and the explorer was compelled to accept as courteously as he might much startling information on the Arctic regions from landsmen

who had never reached a higher latitude than Caithness. The sons of the sea — partly, I imagine, from a good-humoured contempt — are exceedingly tolerant of shore-going ignorance, and Brail, hopeless of teaching them any better, assented to the most preposterous opinions with a freedom that delighted the company, one and all declaring him "wholly free from professional prejudice, and an exceedingly intelligent man!" There is as much truth as satire in the saying of the French wit who attributed his social popularity to a polite readiness in allowing people who knew nothing about them to instruct him on subjects with which he was perfectly conversant!

Roy, who had crossed the Atlantic in a Cunard steamer, and had sighted a real iceberg on one occasion some three leagues to leeward, came out quite as an authority. The whole table listened to him, and Brail, much amused, backed him stoutly in every position he advanced. By the time repletion had produced its usual craving for tobacco, there must have arisen a strange confusion in the brains of the guests as to ice, floating and hummocky, lime-juice, scurvy, walrus-bulls, white bears, the aurora borealis, and, above all, the perihelion—a word everybody insisted on pronouncing with a vague understanding that it implied the visible presence of four suns at once.

The bare idea of such a phenomenon produced an adjournment to the smoking-room in somewhat loose formation, during which movement John Roy found himself grappling his new friend by the arm as they crossed the hall.

"It will be very hot upstairs," said Brail, taking his overcoat from its peg. "What say you to having our baccy outside?"

"Outside it is!" assented the other, who would have agreed to any far more independent proposition. "And I tell you what, my dear fellow: if you'll come with me afterwards, I'll show you something rather curious! Very queer indeed, queerer than anything you saw at the North Pole. A regular up-and-down exhibition of spirit-rapping—complete circle—pretty woman saying the alphabet—question and answer—mediums, miracles, manifestations—blue lights, and blue blazes! Will you come?"

"No collusion?" asked Brail. "No wires, pulleys, nor magic-lanterns? Nothing of that kind?"

"Nothing whatever," answered Roy, with more confidence, perhaps, than he felt. "A lady is going to call for me at eleven—Lady Jane de Banier. Very nice woman. Got a very nice brougham. I'll introduce you. In the meantime let us have a smoke till she comes."

It was a cool, starlit night, the streets seemed at their emptiest, theatres and music-halls had not yet disgorged their contents, and, but for a policeman looking down an area, the two smokers were alone. Brail saw his opportunity, and resolved to make the most of it.

"Mr. Roy," said he, knocking the ash off his cigar, "you and I are almost strangers, but if it wasn't taking a liberty, I should like to do you a good turn."

"You're very kind," replied the other, with whom wine brought out all his best qualities; "do it, and I'll say thank ye. I'm likely to want all the friends I can muster before long."

This was so far encouraging.

"You allude, I suppose, to rather a black job

that I hear on all sides you are taking in hand," returned the sailor. "You'll likely say what business is it of mine? Mr. Roy, when a good fellow has gone overboard, it's everybody's business to heave him a rope."

"To hang himself with?"

"The devil a bit. To *save* himself with! Mr. Roy, what should you say if I was to tell you that your compass does not act, that your charts are false, that you have no instruments to take an observation, and that your dead-reckoning is all wrong?"

"I should say, speak plain English, my good fellow, and I shall know what you mean."

"Then, in plain English, you are steering a course which will never bring you up in the port you want to fetch. Mr. Roy, you won't be offended if I tell you what I know, and what you ought to know too. The lady against whom you are taking proceedings is as innocent as the day."

"Who is to answer for it?"

"I can answer for it. Her aunt can answer for it. All hands can answer for it! We live in the same house; I see her every day, and half a dozen times a day. She works like a black slave, twelve hours at a spell; she receives no visitors; she hasn't been a cable's length from the street door but once in the last month, and that was for a cruise in the Park with *me*. Mr. Roy, that lady is an injured, ill-used woman, and as good as gold!"

Such intelligence, delivered in such good faith, wholly dissipated the fumes of wine, and John Roy's brain grew as clear as if he had drunk nothing but tea for a week. He was surprised to feel how delighted he would be to believe the good

news, but with his restored powers of judgment he could not but remember the accusations of Mrs. Mopus, and the damning evidence of Nelly's own writing, now in his desk under lock and key.

"If you could prove this," he said, with a cordial grasp of the sailor's hand, "you would be the best friend I ever had! I thank you for your good intentions. The truth must come out, soon or late, and if I am wrong, nobody knows how happy I shall be to acknowledge it. In the meantime this is a sacred subject between you and me. Not a word more now, I beg of you—here comes Lady Jane!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

A WORD WITH THE DEAD-ALIVE

N introduction at her brougham door was soon accomplished, and the sailor, hailing a hansom cab, desired the driver to follow in the wake of her ladyship's carriage, thinking that but for Miss Bruce he would rather have envied his new friend, thus taking a passage in so narrow a craft with so pleasant a shipmate. Whether John Roy equally appreciated the position, it is not for me to say; but I imagine the well-lit streets of London never appear to more advantage than when seen after dinner on a cool, still summer's night from the dark interior of a carriage, in company with a white dress, a soft gloved hand, a wave of fragrant hair, and a pair of kind eyes, that dance in the shifting gleams as we pass from lamp to lamp, now bright and mirthful, now dim and tender, now seeking, now afraid to meet our own.

The butt-end of a strongish cigar, thought Brail, was a poor substitute for such company; nevertheless, it served him well enough till his cab stopped with a jerk at the door of a good-sized

house in a quiet street no farther off than a shilling fare from the club where he had dined.

He followed Mr. Roy, who followed Lady Jane, and was speedily introduced to his hostess, a pale, languid woman, small, delicate, and pretty, with rather an affectionate manner and a very sweet voice.

"I have often heard of you, Mr. Brail," said she graciously;—"as who has *not*?" to which the sailor, looking exceedingly foolish under the compliment, muttered some confused acknowledgment that he trusted was unintelligible and he felt was absurd.

"You know Lady Pandora, I think," continued this charming personage, "and most of the others. My husband is not here to-night. Mr. Eccleston remains an unbeliever, and these evenings of mine bore him so dreadfully, that I beg him to keep away."

So she turned placidly to another arrival, observing they might begin now as soon as they liked, for her party was complete.

Though Mr. Eccleston had the bad taste to absent himself from his wife's researches after the supernatural, it was apparent both to sight and smell that he allowed her guests to assemble in his own peculiar retreat. The bookcases against the wall, the plain, solid writing-table, the gloomy effect of the furniture, and generally dispiriting influence of the place, stamped it as "master's-room," even without certain odours of stale tobacco that pervaded the whole. Brail, looking shyly round, made out the party to consist of ten or a dozen, including a formidable old maid in spectacles, a girl with laughing eyes and a tight waist, two officers in the Guards, and an elderly unwashed person, shaggy of beard and hair, accused on insufficient

evidence of having written, of writing, or of being about to write, a book. The sailor made up his mind to feel interested, though wondering a little that spirits should think it worth while to take long journeys for a small party like this. Not that he grudged his shilling fare, but as yet it *did* seem that the entertainment would be dear at eighteenpence!

The room was dimly lighted. A ground-plan of the Eccleston mausoleum lay spread out under the lamp; Lady Jane looked frightened, Lady Pandora bored, and the others conversed in suppressed voices, as if they were at church.

"It's quite still and starlight," observed Mrs. Eccleston in her calm, clear tones. "I think they won't mind coming any distance to-night. If you're all ready, why shouldn't we go upstairs and begin?"

So they trooped off rather unwillingly, Lady Jane keeping a sharp eye on Roy, who seemed disposed to take charge of the tight-waist, but "came to heel" when cautioned readily enough, like a well-broke dog reproved for running sheep, and left his shapely companion for the two Guardsmen to take care of—an arrangement that seemed agreeable to all three.

"Keep near me," whispered her ladyship, as she travelled upstairs with her intended, towards the drawing-room. "Mind you don't let go my hand; I know I shall be so frightened in the dark."

Her misgivings were premature, as a small lamp, which served to reveal the surrounding obscurity, stood on a mahogany table in the middle of the room, round which the party were at once invited to take their seats. When all were placed

Roy found himself between Lady Jane and the bearded man; Brail, who was opposite, having for his supporters the virgin in spectacles and one of the Guardsmen; while tight-waist, as bold as brass, separated this last from his brother-officer. Mrs. Eccleston, having given her directions with great coolness, sat down to complete the circle. Then they all joined hands and looked foolish.

"Now attend to me," said their hostess in her low, sweet, languid voice. "The charm will not work unless we are careful to preserve our chain; therefore, let nothing induce you to let go of each other's hands." ("Nothing whatever!" exclaimed both Guardsmen, while tight-waist faintly giggled her assent.) "Moreover, if you're not really in earnest, it's no use. The spirits can't bear ridicule, and if they think we're laughing at them they won't come near us at all. Don't forget, too, that there is immense virtue in wishing"—("I'm very good at *that*!" whispered a Guardsman)—"so you must keep on wishing for them, as hard as you can. If they seem a little rude and boisterous, you needn't mind. They never mean any harm, and I am not sure they could do much, even if they would. Besides, they profess benevolence to the human race, and I myself believe implicitly in their good faith. Now don't be frightened, Lady Jane —I am going to put out the light."

Lady Jane *was* frightened, for John Roy felt her grasp tighten on his hand; but she scorned to admit it, and sat in complete darkness with her heart beating fast, and all her faculties concentrated in her ears, wishing she hadn't come!

The minutes were very long; at the expiration of five, which seemed like fifty, one of the Guardsmen sneezed, causing the whole circle to start

simultaneously, as if they had sustained an electric shock.

"Don't!" exclaimed a voice out of the dark, that Brail thought he recognised as belonging to tight-waist.

"Don't what?"

"Don't do that!"

"I can't help it."

"Very likely; but don't do it again!"

Brail concluded he *didn't*, as no more sneezes were heard, and the silence became oppressive as before.

"You may talk a little, if you like," suggested Mrs. Eccleston, in so clear and sweet a tone that to the strained nerves of her listeners it seemed as if a spirit were already in the room. "They enjoy mirth and good-humour, they adore harmony. Mr. Brail, can't you sing us a song?"

No, he couldn't. It was not one of his accomplishments. He could dance a hornpipe, even in the dark, if she wished; but Mrs. Eccleston ruled it would be quite out of order, and might frighten away their expected visitors beyond recall.

One of the Guardsmen had a good voice, but knew nothing by heart except "The Two Obadiahs," and tight-waist declared she was too frightened to sing, so Mrs. Eccleston was entreated to carry out her own suggestion, which she did with exceeding sweetness, in the following incantation, given from end to end:—

Will you come to the trusting, the tender, the true,
The longing, the loving, that come not to you,
With tidings of comfort our circle to glad,
With rest for the weary, and hope for the sad?
Oh! steal to our aid, on your fairy-like tread,
From the land of the Living,
The land of the Living,
The land of the Living, that's thronged with the Dead!

What? silent, still silent? Oh! grant, we implore,
  But the faintest of touches on table and floor,
But the lowest of whispers to lurk in our ears,
  Or the lightest of airs, in a breath from the spheres.
Nay, grudge not to cheer us, or why be ye fled
    From the land of the Living,
    The land of the Living,
The land of the Living, that's thronged with the Dead?

Are ye willing? Oh! say, shall we call you by name?
  Shall we watch for the dawn of your pale-coloured flame,
Till the skirts of a shadow are touched in the gleam,
  And the face of a phantom escapes like a dream,
Ere the mourners can learn how their lost one has sped
    In the land of the Living,
    The land of the Living,
The land of the Living, that's thronged with the Dead?

Hush, hush! they have heard us—they pass through the gloom,
  They wave to and fro—they are here in the room!
By the virtue of Will, to our bidding controlled,
  And the clasp of our hands—so we loose not the hold,
For our link at the best is no more than a thread
    To the land of the Living,
    The land of the Living,
The land of the Living, that's thronged with the Dead!

And now a silence that could be felt. Even Brail thought well to pull himself together, as it were, like a man on duty; and John Roy, though his nerves were above the average, began to suspect it possible his imagination might play him a trick.

So they all sat without speaking. Some hands turned hot, others cold, but nobody thought of letting go. The old maid in particular clung, with a drowning clutch, to her supporters on either side. Courage is but a question of custom after all. None of us feel afraid of the danger we are accustomed to encounter, and many a man who has won his Victoria Cross would be exceedingly loath to interfere with a bull that a little girl in a pinafore turns out of a farmyard unmoved. If there were no fear, there would be no bravery; and his is the truest valour who can coolly face an

unforeseen peril in the dark! The unknown, too, seems always terrible; but that curiosity is a stronger instinct than self-preservation, Lord Soulis would have remained staunch to his kirk, Michael Scott been content to leave the Eildon Hills as he found them, and Faust declined to make so ineligible an acquaintance as Mephistopheles.

Nevertheless, poor humanity, notwithstanding its longings after the supernatural, shrinks back from that which it is most anxious to learn. Man's flesh creeps and his blood freezes at the threatened proximity of something alive, but not material, and even the most courageous find themselves passing into the shadow of a nameless dread akin to that which, in the horror of a nightmare, palsies limbs and voice and will.

Presently, on Roy's attentive ear there came a faint rustling, accompanied by certain weak scratchings and scrapings, as if a rat in muslin petticoats were stealing across the floor. At the same moment he distinctly felt a stream of cold air pass over his hands. Lady Jane, whispering "Didn't you hear something?" twined her trembling fingers closer in his own, while he strained his eyes to distinguish such darker shapes and shadows as seemed to grow out of the darkness itself. — "I hope they won't come," whispered tight-waist.—"Stand to your guns, and keep on wishing!" answered one of her supporters; and as she declared subsequently she "wasn't the least bit frightened," we may infer she derived confidence from the security of her position, guarded by these men-of-war on both flanks, not in the least suspecting there could arise misgivings even in their military minds. Gloom and silence had already begun to tell on valour, and they both admitted, next day

when they talked it over at guard-mounting, that "If it wasn't cats or machinery, there was something deuced queer in the whole thing!"

"Come! spirits, come!" said Mrs. Eccleston in her calm treble. "Don't be unkind, sullen, silent, disappointing! Have you nothing to say to us? Come, gentle spirits, come! Hush! There is one in the room now!" John Roy breathed fast, and his hands turned cold, the maiden in spectacles uttered a stifled shriek, and a gentle snore announced that the literary man had fallen asleep.

A chair was heard to move across the floor, at least fifteen feet from the circle, and on the table itself two or three taps, as of a finger-nail, followed each other in quick succession.

Great suspense—tension of the nerves so keen as to be painful. Lady Jane trembled like a leaf, and John Roy began to think there must be "something in it."

"They are not in the best of humour," observed Mrs. Eccleston coolly, as a lady might speak of her children or her ponies. "Still, if we had a good Medium, we might get a Manifestation. Wait a moment. *They* will tap out their answers directly. Spirits, are you there?"

Three faint touches, just audible, meaning "Yes."

"Do I know you? Have I ever spoken to you before?"

A single rap, very distinct, obviously signifying "No."

"Dear me!" murmured the lady. "I wonder who it is. Neither Carrie, nor Helen, nor Augustus. Certainly not Dr. Syntax. Can it be poor Merrylegs?"

Again a decided "No."

"Are you interested in anyone here?"

"Yes."

"Will you speak to him or her?"

"Yes."

"Shall I go over the alphabet?"

Three distinct taps, succeeded by a dozen faint, little flourishes, as though the spirit were capering with delight at so opportune a suggestion.

Mrs. Eccleston then began her A, B, C, going through it with admirable patience and self-possession till she came to the letter R, when an unmistakable rap, smartly delivered, brought her up, to use Brail's expression, "all standing."

She began again, to get no farther than O, but nearly exhausted the whole twenty-six letters the third time, till stopped by the last but one.

"R, O, Y," said Mrs. Eccleston triumphantly. "Mr. Roy, you had better speak for yourself."

Our friend found himself fairly committed to a conversation with the Shades of the Departed; and notwithstanding certain misgivings concerning his catechism, profession of faith, and baptismal vow, felt rather proud of their selection. He was getting accustomed, moreover, to the situation, and his nerves reasserted themselves now that he required their services.

"Are you a friend?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Do you know my past and present?"

"Yes — yes — yes," followed by many confirmatory little scratches.

"My future?"

"Yes," doubtfully, and with hesitation.

"What is it?"

Dead silence; then a few faint taps that seemed

outside the window, and the march of another chair across a different part of the room.

"I don't like it," murmured Lady Jane. "I feel so faint and strange. Dear Mrs. Eccleston, won't you stop them if I get worse?"

"Of course I will, dear. But try and keep up a little longer. I am sure they want to tell Mr. Roy something particular, and will answer any questions he likes to ask."

"Don't be frightened, Lady Jane," added tight-waist, though her own shaking accents rather belied the encouragement. "Nothing can happen if you keep fast hold on both sides."

It is to be presumed this young lady suited the action to the word. But who is to vouch for the unseen? Some of the party, too, under the combined influence of fear and obscurity, were beginning to lose their heads.

"Go on, Mr. Roy," urged his hostess, still perfectly cool and calm. "Don't keep them waiting. They're very fussy and impatient to-night."

"I ask you," continued Roy, in slow, impressive accents, like a man reading prayers, "am I destined to succeed in my undertaking?"

"No."

This seemed a damper, and he thought well to put the question in an amended form.

"Shall I obtain the dearest wish of my heart?" Here Lady Jane tightened her clasp. She was *so* frightened, poor woman! and the spirits seemed to know too much.

An answer came in the affirmative, with endless repetitions and more triumphant kicking up of heels, so to speak, in weird, unholy mirth.

"Explain!" rang out from Brail's deep chest,

loud and sonorous, as if he were hailing the maintop.

Dire confusion ensued. Two or three chairs fairly stampeded about the room; a distant sofa began to plunge; there came a rush of wind, a rustling of dresses, a scraping of feet; tight-waist proclaimed that something was pulling at her skirts; and the table, after a few preparatory sways and lurches, reared straight on end.

"Stop it, please!" exclaimed John Roy. "This is getting serious. Lady Jane has fainted."

"Give me the match-box," said Mrs. Eccleston calmly. "Lady Pandora, you ought to have it in your lap. Spirits! you are rude and noisy," she added in a tone of grave displeasure. "You must behave better another time, or I shall not ask you to come again."

Then she struck a light, with great deliberation; and the bearded man, waking up in a start, observed how—except for pale faces, blinking eyes, and that they sat closer than at first—the circle seemed much in the same relative position as before the lamp was put out and he went to sleep.

Lady Jane, pale, but not wholly unconscious, leaned her head on Roy's shoulder; and one of the Guardsmen asked tight-waist whether there was not yet time for her to faint too? Her ladyship's supporter, however, occupied himself less with the fair sufferer than with the disarrangement of Mrs. Eccleston's furniture, much of which seemed to have moved, by its own volition, about the room. While his hostess proffered eau-de-cologne and smelling salts he revolved these matters in his mind, and, like most of his companions, came to the conclusion that there was "something in it."

"We've not had much of a *séance*," said Mrs. Eccleston, looking calmly round; "and I am afraid you are all disappointed. The conditions were favourable, too, and the weather exactly what they like. But they *are* capricious, there's no denying, and I don't think they will do anything more for us to-night. Dear me! it's almost one o'clock. I am sure everybody must be hungry, and we really deserve some supper after our exertions!"

So she led the way downstairs to a pretty breakfast-room, where a table was laid with fruit, flowers, coffee, ices, cold chicken, sandwiches, and champagne.

"What do you think of it?" asked Roy of the lieutenant, as they brought up the rear of the procession. "It's more than strange — it's wonderful. I wish Lady Jane hadn't fainted. Did you hear how they were beginning to answer my questions?"

"They know more than we give them credit for," answered Brail mysteriously, and with something approaching a wink. But he kept his weather-eye open, that which was next his friend.

CHAPTER XXXIV

EBB AND FLOW

"THE dearest wish of his heart." John Roy could not get the words out of his ears. And he was to obtain it; the spirits had told him so. What was the dearest wish of his heart?—to be divorced from Nelly, and to spend the rest of his life with Lady Jane? Hardly! Was it not rather to be reconciled with the woman whom he began to think he might have suspected and injured without cause, to be assured of her innocence, to know she loved him still, and to read forgiveness in the true grey eyes that he forced himself to forget by daylight, but that haunted him nightly in his dreams? Could the spirits have fathomed his inmost thoughts, and was this the boon they promised in their mischievous impish glee? Oh! why would they not explain, when so adjured by the frank-hearted sailor? They might have accounted for everything, even the letter in Nelly's handwriting, which offered such conclusive evidence of her guilt.

But for that letter he would stop proceedings, even now at the eleventh hour. The detective whom he employed had little to report. Lord Fitzowen, indeed, seemed to have called more than once of late at the Corner Hotel, but penetrated no farther than the threshold, and the

gifts of flowers had ceased altogether. Plunged in uncertainty, tossed and torn by conflicting emotions, he longed for a friend on whom to lean, and began, at this period, much to affect the society of Lieutenant Brail. Meanwhile the Cleopatra of our vacillating Antony could not fail to observe his growing absence of mind, uncertainty of temper, and general despondency. In vain she racked her pretty head to find him fresh amusements, and steered her galley aimlessly to and fro, in search of some enchanted isle wherein to imprison him, if only for an hour. Alas! there was neither "youth at the prow, nor pleasure at the helm." No soft zephyrs, nor laughing mornings; nothing of the poets' glowing imagery, but the coming whirlwind, "that hushed in grim repose, expects his evening prey."

Of course, Cleopatra became the more exacting, the more captious, and pulled all the harder at her string because it looked like breaking. Equally, of course, Antony grew impatient and morose, missed his appointments, absented himself without accounting for his time, sulked, swore, and on one occasion even quitted her with brutal indifference when bathed in a flood of tears!

Was this another of the worthless games for which women burn such costly candles? Lady Jane asked herself the question, and answered it, too, more than once! But must she therefore submit to defeat? No, a thousand times, no! If you want a thing, what matter that the article is only shoddy, tinsel, pinchbeck? Buy it at any cost. Does the seller refuse shillings? Offer pounds, hundreds, thousands. Never stop to calculate, sell your present, mortgage your future, and take possession, that you may crow in triumph

—over what? an egg addled, a bubble burst, a fancy exploded, and a disappointment bitter as gall!

Then will you have gone through a woman's experience, and, for the rest of your life, if you have any grace, may thank your mother that you were born a man!

Perseverance, obstinacy, call it what you will, is a great feminine quality, and in nine cases out of ten meets with the success it deserves. Lady Jane, without the least intention of discontinuing the siege should she fail, resolved on a *coup de main*, and the attack, she reflected, could best be made under cover of a water-party, or some such junketing, which might lead to a dinner out of town, and a drive home by moonlight. People who know what London life is, for those whose business consists solely of amusement, will appreciate her ladyship's exertions in trying to collect some twenty friends wanted on the same day in the middle of June. After all, the wit of the company, the man who was to make the whole thing "go off," disappointed her at the last moment, and she was obliged to put a raw youth, studying at Cambridge, and doing *that* badly, in his place.

Lastly, the person for whom so much trouble must be taken became restive, and declared he didn't want to go. "The party would bore him," he thought. "Besides, he hated the river. It was nothing but a cesspool now, and it made him sick!" When a woman "stoops to conquer," how low will she not descend! I have seen curtseys made to Her Majesty—God bless her!—so abject in their grace, that the beautiful subject seemed to sink through the palace floor, and one almost wondered whether she wouldn't come up again,

like a diving duck, half a gun-shot farther off. A lady's weight can never be calculated till she has got her foot on your neck. But again, nobody knows her extreme docility, unless the position is reversed, and, if you have the heart to do it, you crush the flower under your heel that would fain be blooming next your heart. Lady Jane must have had some sharp twinges ere she brought herself to offer the following bribe.

"We needn't go on the river if you don't like; and as for the party boring you, I mean to have the prettiest women and the pleasantest men in London. What do you say to that flirting girl with the tight waist? The one we met at Mrs. Eccleston's. I am sure she would come if I asked her."

"She's rather nice," answered Roy, suddenly discovering that a day in the country would be no unpleasant variety for the hot weather.

"Anything but *that*!" returned her ladyship. "I should certainly not describe her as *nice*! Loud in her dress, bold in her manner, and always on the look-out for admiration, which don't arrive."

"Why, you said yourself she was pretty!"

"Not exactly. Fresh-looking, but bad style. However, she goes down with gentlemen, and unless one invites these sort of damsels-errant, the very young men won't come."

This was as much as to say, "Don't suppose I am going to let you philander about with tight-waist, instead of attending on me. If she is invited, it must be on the express understanding that you confine yourself to looking, and nothing more!"

"Who else?" continued the gentleman in a careless tone, not unmarked by Lady Jane, that

sufficiently indicated his indifference to the other guests.

"There's the list. You can look it over for yourself. I told Lady Pandora to bring two or three men."

"You had better have said two or three hundred. Lady Pandora is perfectly ridiculous. She can't move without an escort of cavalry! At her age she ought to know better."

"You don't like Lady Pandora now that she has become a friend of mine, and I only made up to her on your account. She is a good-natured woman, after all, and as for her age"— Here Lady Jane stopped, remembering that on the pages of Burke her new friend and herself were recorded as in the same year.

Perhaps this is the one disadvantage under which ladies labour who are "born in the purple." There is no uncertainty in the Peerage or the Stud-book. When both are thorough-bred, a man cannot blind himself to the fact that his mistress is five-and-thirty, and his mare fifteen.

"She is a very worldly woman," continued Mr. Roy, who professed of late a dislike to fine ladies and their ways. "I don't believe she has an idea beyond her dress and her visiting-list. I'll be bound to say she couldn't add up three figures, or order dinner for half a dozen people, without a mistake!"

"Or do plain sewing, or make a rice-pudding," sneered her ladyship, wincing from the implied taunt, and feeling, with a woman's jealous instinct, that he must be thinking of his wife. "She was not brought up to it, Mr. Roy. You don't expect a lady to have the training of a housemaid—or a cook."

"I'm tired of ladies! It's the same story over and over again. Have you seen the So-and-so's? Are you going to such-and-such a ball? Who are these people? Do they *give* things? I suppose we shall be obliged to know them! That is all one gets out of the sort of women one takes down to dinner seven nights in the week. I should like to meet nature sometimes, heart and brains, flesh and blood, truth, sympathy, and a little common sense!"

"*Should* you!" thought my lady, who, to do her justice, had in her composition more flesh and blood, perhaps even more common sense, than he gave her credit for. "You'll know better some day, and certainly you shall not speak like that when I've got you safe in hand and firmly broken in!" but she only looked kindly in his face and answered with a spice of covert satire, "I'm surprised *you* should say that. I think a woman is always agreeable with a pleasant man at her elbow. We don't want much encouragement to talk, and if there are long intervals of silence during dinner, it's generally *your* fault, not *ours*. At least that is *my* experience, and I used to dine out a great deal before you came to London."

He could not but be mollified by the loving glance and the flattering inference. "Any fellow would make himself agreeable who sat by *you*," he answered. "I was thinking of very different people, like Lady Pandora and *her* lot. Never mind. Let us hear the plan of the campaign. Where are you going to take us, and what shall you do to us when we get there?"

"I meant to go down by water, but you say you hate the river, and it *does* look melancholy with the tide out. My plan is to drive to Bushy,

where we can all meet and admire the chestnuts. They must look beautiful now."

"They did a week ago. People take care to miss them at their best. *Après?*"

"Then let us go on to Hampton Court, make our bows to bluff King Hal, ask some of our poor relations to give us tea, walk in that quaint old garden, and perhaps lose ourselves in the Maze. Young people delight in the Maze."

Visions of tight-waist flitting to and fro like a hunted hind through alleys of evergreens crossed John Roy's brain, and he signified a cordial assent.

"When we've had enough of it," continued her ladyship, "let us go on to Richmond, dine at The Castle—I've arranged all that—and drive home by moonlight. Do you approve?"

"I shall like the driving back," answered Roy, who could not well say less, and who, indeed, was never loath to return home from such festivities. "I think it sounds pleasant enough."

"Then you won't throw me over?" returned Lady Jane affectionately. "You couldn't be so cruel! I have got to depend upon you so for everything, because I feel you have too good a heart to play me false."

CHAPTER XXXV

HAMPTON COURT

"THEN take auntie. *She* likes it, and it will do her good."

The speaker was Nelly, sitting in her glass case as usual, pen in hand.

"Steady! I mean to take you both. You'll never be yourself again till you get some fresh air. When I knew you first you carried a red ensign; now you have hauled it down and hoisted the white. Look out, Mrs. John, that you don't run up the yellow flag before you've done!"

The honest seaman was right; though her smile seemed cheerful enough, it could not conceal from Brail, nor anyone else, the ravages deep sorrow and bitter injustice had made on that fair fresh face. Her eyes were sunk, her cheeks fallen, and though her beauty had gained something in refinement, it had lost the delicacy of tint which made it so attractive in the old happy days long ago.

Even her aunt deplored the change, and held many a consultation with their firm friend the lieutenant as to what should be done. The one called her "out of sorts," the other "out of gear," but neither could devise better remedies than amusement, variety, and fresh air.

"You ought to go, Nelly—you ought indeed,"

argued Mrs. Phipps, taking part in these deliberations. "I am sure at your age I would have jumped at such an offer, like a cock at a gooseberry! June weather, my dear; a day in the country; a pleasure-trip on board a steamboat; and a sailor beau to look after you—what more can a young woman want? And it's strange if such an old-established business as ours can't take care of itself for a summer's afternoon. You seem to expect you will find the hotel vanished when you come back!"

So Nelly was over-persuaded, and, accompanied by her aunt—who, having an attraction of her own in the shape of a female friend at Hampton Court, required little pressing for so agreeable a jaunt—put on, with her best bonnet and a new pair of gloves, as cheerful a face as she could command, to do credit to their gallant escort, the enterprising Brail.

Auntie's get-up was not quite so successful. Black and gold, as much as possible of both, had always been her conception of full dress. But for the one she was gay and glittering as a jeweller's shop, but for the other, sombre and imposing as a six-plumed hearse. Her face, though, shone with good-humour, and that well-pleased smirk which nobody can call up at will, and which is, indeed, the very trade-mark of a Londoner out for a brief, rare holiday.

So these three took shipping in a penny boat at a commodious place of embarkation, no longer called Hungerford Stairs, and, except that the elder lady showed much interest in a mechanical contrivance for lowering the funnel of the steamer under Putney Bridge, while she compared its captain, invidiously, with her own nautical hero Brail, nothing worthy of remark occurred during

the entire passage. The lieutenant, who, with a certain bluffness of manner, possessed much of that tact which comes from a kind heart, devoted himself to auntie's amusement, leaving Nelly to the quiet enjoyment of air, sunshine, green trees, shining water, and the soothing monotony of continuous motion against the stream. If people only knew the kindness they can sometimes confer by leaving us alone! This is no place to enter on the higher consolations of religion, the gracious words spoken expressly for the bruised reed and the broken heart, that raise the fallen far above the level of earthly shame and earthly care: but such holy considerations apart, do we sufficiently appreciate the mere material repose of mind and body that we never fail to find within the walls of a church? For an hour and three-quarters no mortal can molest us with greeting, narrative, or repartee. No post invades the sacred precincts, nor note requiring an immediate answer; the most enthusiastic acquaintance neither dare smile, nor nod, nor insist on shaking hands, and however dull, nay, drowsy, may be the sermon, how can we think it tedious when it prolongs, if but by minutes, this grateful interval of solitude, that comes but on one day in the whole busy week?

Nelly, leaning against the side to watch the water as it flowed by, did not so much think as dream. Sorrows, cares, regrets, and injuries seemed to float down with the ebb towards the sea, and hope, the offspring of memory, as skill is the child of experience, beckoned her on to shape her true course against wind and tide, not entirely despairing of a change here, and confident in a better time hereafter.

She had struggled to do right, as women alone

do struggle, against a flood of difficulties under which a man would long ago have yielded and gone down. It is not the so-called stronger sex that fights hardest with privation, sorrow, the tempter's lures, and its own overpowering affections, for the bare reward of an approving conscience. In London alone how many thousands are there of an undefeated Legion, who work their fingers to the bone on a dry crust and a sip of tea, rather than lose an atom of self-respect, or suffer a breath of suspicion to dim their spotless shields! What are the boasts of chivalry to courage such as this? And for us gentlemen, who assume to hold honour as the very air we breathe, do we help or hinder them in their path? No. We look on such things too lightly, and in spite of a dishonest proverb, believe me, "All is *not* fair in love and war!"

"Why, you're better every moment, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Phipps, as the steamer touched its landing-place. "By the time we get to Hampton Court you'll look like yourself again, and do us credit—won't she, Mr. Brail? As for me, I declare the river and the breeze and the swans, and one thing and another, have set me up so, that if the fiddler would only go on with his scraping, I do believe I should begin to dance. I feel like five-and-twenty, Mr. Brail, and I've *you* to thank for it; but I *should* relish a glass of gingerbeer!"

That refreshment was easily obtained, and the three soon found themselves at Hampton Court Palace, where Mrs. Phipps went to visit her friend, maid and housekeeper to a peer's daughter, living rent-free as the lodger of her Sovereign, while Nelly and Brail walked on to wait in the gardens, where they met a crowd of both sexes, chiefly

Londoners of the lower class, about to return home by the train, happy, hilarious, and, seeing that it was thirsty, hay-making weather, not quite so well-behaved as usual.

"Excuse me for a minute!" exclaimed Brail, whose quick eye caught sight of an old shipmate in the throng. "Don't go farther than the lawn. I shall be back directly. I can't help myself. It's a case of man-overboard. There's nothing else to be done."

His face expressed stern disgust, and, indeed, not without cause. In the midst of some half-dozen roughs, who looked perhaps worse than they really were, but could only be classed as the least desirable society for an officer and a gentleman, he spied an old friend holding forth with such thickened volubility of speech and grotesque vehemence of gesture, as declared him to be pleasantly drunk at six in the afternoon.

His face shone, his eyes wandered, he swayed and lurched on uncertain feet with idiotic smiles, while his hat was pushed back on his head at the angle that denotes hopeless imbecility or irretrievable defeat.

Alas! can such things be? Sober, this man was a smart officer, a consummate seaman, a hearty messmate, and a sterling friend. Drunk, he seemed simply a butt, a laughing-stock, a tom-fool for the rabble to hoot and jeer.

He knew it too, nobody better, in his lucid intervals; knew that his professional prospects, the bread he ate, his standing as an officer, his character as a gentleman, his soundness of mind and body, the very welfare of his soul, depended on resistance to that vicious craving which had grown to be his curse, and yet he gave way,

hobnobbing, as it were, with the demon who pressed the poison to his lips, and priding himself on such good-fellowship as must constitute the conviviality of hell.

Not broke yet, strange to say, but wearing the Queen's uniform still, and drawing the Queen's pay. Never a week in port without many a "squeak for it"; sometimes, even in blue water, guilty of that offence which is justly unpardonable by our Articles of War. Who shall say how often his messmates screened him by taking his duty on themselves—how the very topmen anticipated his orders, moved by pity, not without contempt, or the master-at-arms turned away his lantern in mingled sorrow and disgust? The surgeon's mate tried in vain to make him a teetotaler, as the one indispensable step towards becoming hereafter an admiral.

Catching sight of Brail, he recognised his old shipmate, and staggered to meet him with a cordiality that must have seemed truly gratifying, had it not been the offspring of grog.

"Come aboard at last, my hearty!" said he, holding on to his friend, and hiccoughing his greetings in strange confusion of time and place. "An old messmate, my lads," looking angrily round. "Make him welcome, all hands, and don't stand grinning there like a shipload of monkeys! He's an explorer, my sons, this is—a North Pole man! Excuse me, old chap; we'd have had the yards squared, and the side manned, if you'd only warned us. Give us your flipper—there's mine! Look at it! I tell ye, as honest a fist as ever broke a biscuit! Hold on now! Let's go below and liquor up!"

With a view of carrying out this hospitable

suggestion, he suffered Brail to lead him out of the gardens, closely watched by one of the caretakers of the place, and dismissed with three cheers from the rabble, for whom this agreeable little interlude had provided a laughable entertainment, tragic, comic, and burlesque, with nothing to pay.

Our friend felt in a false position, and winced sorely; but he was the last man to shirk a job, however unpleasant, that came in the shape of duty; so he steered his drunken companion towards the inn as best he could, resolving, when safely housed, to put him in charge of the landlord, lock him up in a bedroom, and return for him after auntie and Mrs. John had concluded their day's amusement, the last thing at night.

It was most inconvenient, and Brail believed nothing could have added to his discomfiture; but even in the lowest depths there is a lower deep still, and as no man should presume to declare he has spent a happy day till it is time to go to bed, so there is no social complication so perplexing but that it may be enhanced by the inopportune arrival of fresh actors on the scene.

At the gate that offered egress and escape, the sober sailor, grappling stoutly to his drunken messmate, found himself in the very centre of Lady Jane's party, comprising some of the smartest people in London, who had yawned their way through Bushy Park, under the chestnuts, to seek new distraction, or, at least, something fresh to weary them, in the Palace Gardens.

Lords and ladies, chaperons and their charges, old men and maidens, wives without their husbands, husbands without their wives, such a gathering as constitutes a pleasant picnic, all in the freshest attire, and all more or less wishing for dinner-time

Found himself right in the centre of
Lady Janes' party.

—some to exchange secrets, some partners, some because they were hungry, and some because they were bored.

So much beauty, rigged so tastefully, was too much for a British sailor in his cups, and nothing but Brail's personal strength prevented his charge from staggering up to Lady Jane herself, and asking her to dance with him then and there.

Covered with confusion, but holding on to his man like one of the old-fashioned pressgang, our lieutenant had nearly extricated himself from the well-dressed, well-bred, wondering throng, when, of all people in the world, he came face to face with Lord Fitzowen and Miss Bruce! Even at such a crisis he did not lose his head. Boy and man, his training had gifted him with a second nature, that only grew the calmer and more quick-sighted for increasing emergency. He marked Hester turn red and pale; nor were the truth and courage lost on him that prompted the girl to defy criticism and give him a kindly greeting as she went by.

Good-natured Fitz, who seemed in lower spirits than usual, made no comments whatever, but others of the company were neither so courteous nor so discreet.

"Who is your friend, Miss Bruce?" asked one; "Jack's alive!" laughed another, recognising the Arctic explorer, and pleased to have a fling, like the world in general, at a man who had made his mark. "The grog has been served out early to-day, and these two have taken their allowance"; while Lady Jane whispered in her ear, "My dear Hester, what a disgusting sight! How *could* you notice him? I hope you will never speak to the man again!"

Partly for the pleasure of contradicting her

ladyship, more, we will hope, from an honest instinct of manhood, John Roy took up the cudgels for his ally.

"How like Brail!" he exclaimed, "always first to help in a difficulty. He is hauling a drunken man out of the gardens. I'll go and see him through the job!"

So without waiting for Hester's bright glance of gratitude, or the scowl with which her ladyship —who wanted him to-day, of all days, at her apron-strings—reproved his desertion, he turned his steps towards the inn, leaving the rest to roam through the cool stone passages of the Palace, and—delightful pastime—shout to each other how completely they were bewildered in the Maze.

CHAPTER XXXVI

FAR ABOVE RUBIES

DISAPPOINTMENT, thy name is pleasure-hunting! Amongst all Lady Jane's company, how few were fortunate enough to find the gratification they came so far to seek! Hester, who left home in the highest spirits, with a vague hope that Brail might be invited, felt a greater depression than she chose to acknowledge when she discovered her mistake, but it vexed her still more to reflect that under such unfavourable conditions it would have been far better not to have met at all. Lady Jane, in spite of endless trouble, countless notes, complicated arrangements of all kinds, and a new dress from Paris, composed for the occasion, saw her own especial admirer, the captive of her bow and spear, fly off at a tangent on the first opportunity. Lady Pandora, who had taken advantage of her friend's permission to bring, with half a dozen other followers, Lord Fitzowen for her particular benefit, chafed to find that volatile nobleman out-of-sorts, out-of-spirits, and, to use her own words, "just as dull as anybody else!"

Fitz himself, having come on the off-chance of being amused, tried tight-waist only to find her wanting, flitted like a butterfly from flower to flower without settling on any one specimen, and, finally, when the others began to explore the Maze in pairs,

sauntered off to smoke by himself, revolving in his own mind whether or not the whole system of modern society was a mistake, and women rather a bore after all!

It may be doubted if Nelly, sitting unconscious, with her back to a grand old tree, scarce a bow-shot off, did not really enjoy the hush and quiet of a summer's evening in these beautiful gardens more than any of them. The trim lawns, the luxuriant roses, drooping, but not overblown, the scented pinks, never so sweet as at sun-down, the red-brick wall, the dark, clear-cut cypresses, and, beyond all the wealth of grass, foliage, and forest trees, shutting her, as it were, into a June paradise, seemed so delightful a contrast to Corner Street and the Strand! As her eyes wandered from the pure blue sky above, laced with its streaks of white, to the daisies, drowsily closing their cups at her feet, she felt such thoughts rising from heart to brain as lips can never clothe in language—indefinite longings, vague aspirations, a thousand gentle wandering fancies, too high for words, "too deep for tears," and realised, perhaps, with wistful consciousness, the paradox of the French sentimentalist, that solitude, to be enjoyed, must be shared with another to whom one can say, "How sweet is solitude!"

Such a companion was nearer than she supposed, and, dreamily as she sat there, a crisis was impending on which her whole future life should turn.

There came a whiff of tobacco, a light step on the turf, an exclamation of surprise, and the next moment Lord Fitzowen stood before her, his cheek flushed, his eyes sparkling, his face radiant with delight.

Nelly, on the contrary, turned paler than ever,

rose as if to walk away, and sank helplessly back to her seat, because limbs and courage failed her in a breath.

He dashed the cigar from his lips—a contraband article, forbidden to be consumed in these royal precincts—while, with a homage the more flattering that it seemed wholly involuntary, he took his hat off as if in the presence of his queen.

Neither spoke, and one hated herself for the blush that she felt would *not* be kept down.

"Mrs. Roy!" he stammered, too much in earnest to be conscious of the ludicrous; "you here of all people in the world! I thought I was never to set eyes on you again!"

"I came with my aunt," answered Nelly, trying to regain composure. "I expect her back every minute. I am only waiting here till she returns."

To his ear her voice sounded cold, formal, constrained; to her own it seemed as if somebody else was speaking, mechanically, and a long way off.

His lordship, glancing from right to left, and observing no tokens of "my aunt," took courage to proceed.

"I have never called for weeks, Mrs. Roy. I have kept away, though—though I was anxious about you, and most unhappy. I would not even send any more flowers, because you seemed not to like it."

"You were right; I did *not* like it."

"But why? Surely people may be friends. When you were at the Grange I might ride over three times a week, and you always looked glad to see me then."

"That was different."

"Of course it was—very different. I suppose you tolerated me in compliance with the laws of

hospitality. Now that you can do as you please, you shut the door in my face."

"Oh no, no!"

"It looks like it. I am sure you are unhappy. That is what makes me miserable. I hear you spoken of unkindly, and I have not even the right to stand up for you. I feel that I could be a help, a comfort—to a certain extent a defence—and you refuse to let me see your face, as if I were your bitterest enemy—I, who would give my life willingly to spare you an hour of pain! It seems so hard, so cruel, so unjust!"

The tears were in her eyes. "Don't say that, Lord Fitzowen; don't say that—you make *me* wretched too!"

"Then I won't! No word or deed of mine shall add an ounce to your burden. I only wish to share it. We could carry it so much easier between us. Mrs. Roy (how much longer must I call you by that hateful name?), we have met here by the merest accident. It's a thousand to one against such a chance occurring again—will you not listen for five minutes? I am like a man pleading for his life!"

She could not but pity him. He seemed so tender, so considerate, so respectful, and withal so very sad. "It will break his heart, poor fellow!" thought Nelly, "but I suppose I shall have to tell him the truth. How I wish auntie would come, or Mr. Brail!"

The latter was nearer than she thought, and somebody else too, who had arrived at this opportune moment to hear a declaration of love made to his own wife.

John Roy's assistance had been of the utmost service in helping our friend the lieutenant to pacify

his drunken messmate. Able-bodied men and sober, partly by moral persuasion, partly by exercise of physical strength, these two got their charge housed in the inn, where they dosed him with soda-water and induced him to lie down on a black horsehair sofa, the more readily that above it hung a picture of an old-fashioned three-decker under press of sail. When fairly asleep, Brail locked the door and put the key in his pocket, observing calmly that the window was too high for their prisoner to jump out, while if he should attempt it and break his neck there would be no great loss! Returning from their joint exploit, a happy thought struck the lieutenant—that this was the moment to bring about an interview between his friend and the wife he had so misjudged; that by his intervention a reconciliation might take place here, this very afternoon, for the clearing up of all misunderstanding and to the complete satisfaction of both. It speaks well for the sailor's unselfishness, and manly sense of right, that he should have postponed to such an immediate duty his intention of seeking Miss Bruce, to hold her hand in his, if only for half a minute, and entreat her not to judge him too harshly by what she had seen.

"Let us take a turn up and down, to cool ourselves," suggested this diplomatist, wiping his brown face; "that fellow is as strong as a bull! A round or two more would have given me a wet shirt."

"With all my heart," assented Roy, who rather enjoyed the tussle. "I suppose they wouldn't stand one's smoking a cigar here?"

"I suppose not," answered the other. "You see, to a certain extent, it's Her Majesty's quarter-deck. You don't want to go cruising after your party, for ten minutes or so?"

"Not I! they're all over the place by now, and I don't much care if I never see them again. I should have kept away if I had known of one or two that are here."

"One or two" meant really "one," namely, Lord Fitzowen, brought by Lady Pandora at the last moment, much against his will.

"There seems to be a whole fleet of muslin," continued the sailor, "and some very pretty girls amongst them. I *think* I saw Miss Bruce."

"Of course you did! The pick of the basket, too, in my opinion. Except one, perhaps—a girl with a tight waist."

"A tight waist," repeated the other musingly, for he was thinking of his *coup de théâtre*, and wondering how far Mrs. John could have wandered by herself. "Ah! wants taking out of stays very likely. Lively enough, too, I daresay, and as trim as a Sunday in port. What are they all up to now?"

"What are women always up to? Fool-catching, fool-matching, and fool-hatching—that seems about the sum-total of a lady's life. They're at the catching by this time, romping and laughing in the Maze."

Brail winced. In his mind's eye he beheld some audacious buccaneer steering his adored craft through those intricate channels, guiding her steps, pressing her hand, whispering in her ear, looking under her bonnet, perhaps. No, hang him! he wouldn't think of it any more!

"Have you ever explored the Maze?" asked the sailor, peering about on all sides in search of the lady he required. "They tell me it's a safe berth enough, but once in, you can't get out again!"

"Like marriage," replied the other cynically. "We do lose our way while we're looking for it, and make fools of ourselves in order to be satisfied there is nothing to find out!"

"Marriages might be happy enough," answered Brail, "if people only put more confidence in each other. A frank word or two would clear up most misunderstandings. We've a saying in the Service, that it is well to let the ship steer herself, and a man ought to trust his wife when she is out of sight, just the same as if"—

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Roy, choking in ungovernable anger, and discharging an oath he ought to have been ashamed of. "I'll have it out with him now, once for all! How lucky I brought a stick with me instead of an umbrella!"

But the sailor's grasp was on his arm like a vice, pinning him to the spot. "Hold on!" he whispered. "Keep steady, only for two minutes, and when you want me, I'll stand by you through thick and thin!"

They were not six yards from the tree under which Nelly had taken her seat. Behind its mighty girth they heard the well-known voice of Lord Fitzowen pleading with fervour and devotion worthy of a better cause.

"Don't hate me, Mrs. Roy," urged the impassioned speaker. "Don't say that I am wicked, unprincipled, and taking advantage of your unhappy position. I have anticipated all that. I have thought it over till it has nearly driven me mad! Try and look at the matter from my point of view. Put yourself in my place, and say whether one can risk too much, when the whole happiness of life is at stake. Nobody ever cared for you as I have, from the day I first took you in to dinner at the

Grange, when you seemed as much out of my reach as an angel in heaven. Do you remember?"

John Roy held his breath to catch her answer. It never came: but his wife must have betrayed some token of pity or assent, that encouraged her admirer to proceed swimmingly with his suit.

"It is different now. I cannot bear to speak of such things; but you ought to know that even the laws of *man* are about to set you free. Mr. Roy is every day occupied in procuring his divorce."

"How can he?" murmured Nelly; "how can he? If he only knew!"

Lord Fitzowen, looking in her face, believed that her eyes were dry, but the listeners were not so deceived, for they heard the tears in her voice.

"When freedom comes," answered Fitz, with an idea that he was winning, "why are you not to avail yourself of it? I would have waited patiently for that happy time, and never spoken a word, had we not met here to-day. Can you wonder that I, too, lose my head now? Think what it is to be near you again, to see the dear face, paler, sadder, but more beautiful, more lovable than ever! Oh! Mrs. Roy, have pity on me! I'll wait a hundred years, only give me a hope that at some future time you will be mine."

"Your wife?"

"My wife."

"Lord Fitzowen, are you in earnest?"

One of the listeners bounced forward. But for that grasp on his arm he would have spoilt it all.

"As I hope for heaven," answered his lordship, who did not seem to take in that he was wandering far out of the straight path.

"And you would marry a divorced woman? would give your name to one whose own had been

Walked round the tree to find herself face to face with her husband

dragged through the dirt, and take to your home a wretch your family would be ashamed to own?"

"Readily! gladly! thankfully! I love you, and that is enough!"

"I think you do," she returned, gently and sadly. "Therefore you deserve that I should tell you the truth. Now listen to me, Lord Fitzowen. Even if I had never known *him*, if I had seen you first, you must not be too sure that I should have cared for you. Many women—most women—might, and hereafter you will find somebody who will make you far happier than you would ever have been with *me*. That is not the question. There are such things to consider as right and wrong. I hope to get to that heaven of which you speak so lightly, and I hope you will get there too. How could I kneel down and say my prayers at night after committing so grievous a sin as to promise you the affection I swore to cherish until death for another? I know nothing of the laws of men, Lord Fitzowen, but I try to obey the laws of God. You and I must meet no more. I mean what I say—not because the good would shun, and the bad laugh at us, not even because I cannot feel for you as you seem to wish, nor because our friendship is an imprudence and an impossibility, but simply because it is a sin."

Then she rose and walked round the tree, to find herself face to face with her husband, who had heard every word!

One moment she seemed rooted to the spot, her sweet face quivering as if she must burst into a passion of tears—the next, with a quiet dignity that could not have been outdone by the noblest lady in the land, she placed her arm in the sailor's, and walked him off towards the Palace, observing

gently, "I am so glad to have found you, Mr. Brail. Take me back to auntie, and take me home."

The situation was almost grotesque. Husband and lover stood confronting each other, speechless and aghast. The latter spoke first—

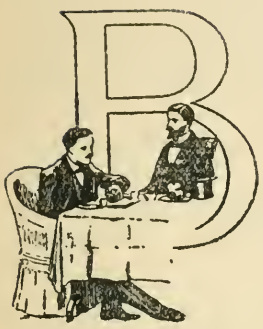
"I am foully in the wrong," said he, "and I don't know what reparation I can make. But this I *do* know, Mr. Roy. By —— your wife is the best woman that ever walked on earth!"

Then raising his hat, with a courtesy that had in it something of defiance, he stalked gravely away in one direction, while John Roy, not knowing exactly what to do, took himself off in another.

Let us hope that tight-waist, her captives and rivals, enjoyed their Richmond dinner. Some of the older guests assuredly did *not*. Lord Fitzowen was absent in body—Lady Pandora in mind. Mr. Roy, grave and preoccupied, never spoke a word during the whole entertainment; and Lady Jane, with a fixed red spot on either cheek, unusually stately, and laboriously polite, was obviously as cross as two sticks.

CHAPTER XXXVII

POST-DATED



RAIL slept longer than usual after the day's work recorded in our last chapter. Handing his two ladies into another compartment, he returned to London by the same train, in charge of his drunken messmate, whom he saw safe home to his lodgings, where he helped to put him to bed. He had not yet "turned out," as he called it, when a laconic note arrived from John Roy to the following effect:—

"DEAR BRAIL,—You are the best of friends! Come and see me here as soon as possible. You will understand why I do not go to you.—Gratefully yours, J. R."

In a very short space of time the ready sailor was at his correspondent's door, fresh, clean-shaved, and well-dressed, as if he had devoted hours instead of minutes to his careful toilet.

Roy, who was drinking tea, jumped up and grasped him by the hand. Then the two looked sheepish and awkward, as only Englishmen can, each waiting for the other to begin.

"Have some breakfast?" said the host.

"Thanks," answered the guest, sitting down.

Not a word for nearly five minutes, only a great clatter of plates and munching of dry toast.

Presently Roy looked up. "That was touch-and-go, yesterday," said he. "I should have put my foot in it, if it hadn't been for *you*."

"I think you just *would*!"

More munching and another application to the teapot, a box of cigarettes pushed across the table, a light struck, and at last they found their tongues, conversation proceeding smoothly under the influence of tobacco, like machinery that has been oiled.

"I want very much to speak to you this morning."

"I knew you would. That's why I came."

"After what we heard yesterday, I begin to think I am in the wrong."

"You have been in the wrong all through."

"Thanks! I hate a fellow not to say what he means. If you must have your leg off, it's no use the sawbones pretending it won't hurt. Now I want to show you something that will prove I am not such a brute as you think."

"I should like to be satisfied of that. Fire away!"

Roy walked to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and drew from it the letter to Lord Fitzowen which had caused him so much bitterness. "Read," said he, placing it in the sailor's hands. "I would give ten years of my life to find any excuse, any palliation, any crevice of escape from the conclusion I am forced to draw."

Brail read it attentively more than once, and his face fell with every line. At the end of his last

perusal, it expressed no less astonishment than concern.

"How did this fall into your hands?" he asked, after a long pause of consideration.

"My housekeeper brought it me the last time I went down to Royston Grange. She found it hidden away, and no doubt forgotten, in Mrs. Roy's jewel-case."

"Your housekeeper? Has she been with you long?"

"Years. Before I married she was almost mistress of the place — ordered everything, paid for everything, and kept the whole establishment going. I could trust her like myself."

Again the sailor pondered. "It must have been rather a come-down," said he, "when Mrs. Roy took the command over her head; or did she still continue to serve out the stores and all that?"

"No. Mrs. Roy was an excellent manager, and looked to everything herself."

"Did she turn discontented under fresh regulations? I don't mean mutinous, but slack with the duty, and disrespectful to her new mistress?"

"Not exactly. But she certainly seemed to dislike her."

Again Brail went over the letter, apparently more puzzled than before.

"Are you satisfied this is your wife's handwriting?"

"I can swear to it! Besides, there's the very monogram we devised together not a week before she went away. How *can* women be so false! She seemed fond enough of me then."

"Only a week before? They must have been very quick with the die. Who engraved it?"

"Pattern & Press, in Oxford Street. I've employed them ever since I was a boy."

"Did you write to them with the order?"

"No; but she did. I posted the letter myself!"

"Do you remember when?"

"On the nineteenth of March. I am certain of the date, because we were stopped hunting by frost."

"And when did your wife leave Royston Grange for good?"

"On the twenty-seventh."

"Mr. Roy, I think I see daylight. Will you put on your shore-going togs, and come in a cab with me?"

The "shore-going togs" were speedily assumed, and our energetic lieutenant, hurrying his friend into a hansom, desired its driver to make all sail for Oxford Street, and bring up at the well-known firm of Pattern & Press.

Pulling John Roy after him, he strode hastily into the back-shop and requested to see Mr. Press.

A smiling person, who made as if he were washing his hands, "regretted Mr. Press had that moment stepped out."

"Mr. Pattern then?"

The smiling person, not without bowing an apology for his own existence, intimated that *he* was Mr. Pattern. "What could he do for the gentlemen in the absence of his partner?"

"Do you know who *this* is?" asked Brail.

"Mr. Roy, I believe," was the deferential answer. "Excuse me if I am mistaken. My sight is not so good as it used to be."

"Has he paid his account?"

"I believe not. I hope not. Most unusual to send it in before Christmas. Sorry to trouble Mr.

Roy with *any* account, however long standing. One of our oldest customers."

"Never mind that! Can you let us have it now?"

"Certainly—certainly. Our book-keeper shall make it out in five minutes. Will the gentlemen take chairs and wait?"

"What are you driving at?" whispered Roy. "In the first place, I have only a few shillings in my pocket. How can I pay the bill when they bring it me?"

"Easy!" answered the other; while Mr. Pattern, regarding the speaker in mute astonishment, proffered the wished-for document, which Brail possessed himself of at once and slapped down with exceeding energy on the counter, exclaiming—"I was sure of it! Lower away now, my hearty! We're winning hand-over-hand. It's as plain as a pikestaff! No man alive can dispute such a fact as this, regularly entered on the ship's log! See here: 'March the 28th. To six quires of letter-paper, cream-laid, with new monogram and envelopes to match, 12*s.* 6*d.*' March the twenty-eighth—do you observe the date? Mr. Pattern, can you verify this entry of yours? When was the packet of letter-paper posted?"

"On the twenty-eighth, sir. Here it is in the day-book. Addressed—Mrs. Roy, Royston Grange."

"That's enough. There's something below the water-line here, that must and shall see light. It's lucky we thought of overhauling that big book. Mr. Roy, the sooner you and I clear out of this the better!"

In the street Brail could express himself with greater freedom. "Don't you see," he continued, "that letter carries *forgery* on the face of it? Mrs.

Roy left the Grange on the twenty-seventh. This paper with the new monogram was never delivered there till the twenty-eighth. Somebody has tried to ruin her by imitating her handwriting, and I have my own suspicions who that somebody is. Let us hail another cab and drive to your lawyer's."

Roy suffered himself to be led like a child by his energetic friend. "I am in your hands," said he; "do with me what you like."

Mr. Sharpe, who seemed much less of a "land-shark" than Brail expected, and was indeed an honourable, right-thinking gentleman, coincided with the sailor in his opinion that Mr. Roy should proceed home at once, there to leave no stone unturned till he had discovered the author of this foul conspiracy.

"I'll go there too, and see him through it," added the sailor, with characteristic decision. "Will you lend us a purser's-mate, or a clerk, or an idler of some kind, to overhaul the accounts? It might be a great help; for if we have to hold a Court of Inquiry, there will be some hard swearing, I fancy, all round!"

"I don't know what a purser's-mate is," answered the lawyer, laughing, "and we have no idlers in *our* service, but you shall take one of my clerks, and welcome! He can go down by the next train."

So at six o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Mopus, sitting comfortably over her tea, was startled by a ring at the hall-door, and the appearance of her master, with two strange gentlemen, standing on the steps.

"It's lucky I had my little card-party yesterday!" she thought, reflecting how awkward it would have been to conceal, or get rid of, certain guests who occasionally refreshed themselves by her invitation

at Mr. Roy's expense. "What *can* they want, coming unbeknownst like this? Three of them, and nothing in the house but a cold cherry-tart and a spare-rib of pork!"

She was soon to be undeceived as to their motives. In vain she dressed her countenance in smiles, affecting extreme cordiality of welcome for her master, and concern for the comfortable lodging of his friends. John Roy's face was dark and inscrutable, his words brief, his bearing stern. She had never seen him like this but once, when he discharged a butler at an hour's notice who had been robbing him with impunity for six or seven years.

"We do not intend to sleep here, Mrs. Mopus," said he. "I have only come down to settle your accounts. Be good enough to bring the books into my library at once."

Her face changed from drab to grey.

"They're not made up, sir," she answered, dropping a curtsey on trembling knees. "It's too much trouble to ask you to wait—I have plenty of money to go on with. I could send them up to town, Mr. Roy, in the course of to-morrow."

He only answered, "I want to see them now," and there was nothing for it but to bring them in as they were, and stand the shot.

The lawyer's clerk, more at home with figures than either of the others, and acknowledged by Brail to be "a very smart fellow," saw through it all at a glance. Overcharges, false entries, a general cooking of balances at the foot of each page, and Elinor Roy's name signed in full to verify certain columns that would have thrilled her housewifely soul with indignation and dismay.

"This old catamaran must be disrated at once,"

said Brail, "and she ought to be put in irons before sundown. But if we can get her to confess the truth, it's worth all the money. I should pay her off, and cut her adrift without another word."

Mrs. Mopus, subsequently explaining matters in her own circle, asked, "What was a poor woman to do with three great strong fellows brow-beating and bully-ragging of her, and taking down of all she said in pen and ink, as if they was judge and jury, and what-not? She was that upset and put about she couldn't have told you whether she stood on her head or her heels, and confessed to every-think in course. But as to the questions these wicked men asked, and how she answered them, she couldn't call to mind now no more than the dead!"

Brail's account, for the satisfaction of a young lady who afterwards cross-examined him pretty sharply on that and other matters, told a very different story.

"She fell on her knees, Miss Bruce," said he, "and implored mercy from us all. Particularly the lawyer's clerk, whom I think she took for Jack Ketch under a foreign flag. Then she acknowledged to having purloined the stores, falsified the accounts, and generally robbed her employer through thick and thin. Lastly, she would not deny that she had practised copying Mrs. Roy's handwriting till she became so smart at it as to forge that letter to Lord Fitzowen, which so nearly blew all hands into the air. She did it because she hated her, and she hated her because she thought her mistress would never make a good wife to Mr. Roy. It was all done for her master's sake, even the false entries in the chandler's book! She was firmly attached to him, had been so from the first—

a devoted servant and a faithful friend. Though he drove her out of doors at the end of ten years, without a roof to cover her, she would always pray for his welfare, and if he would only spare her now this once, he might some day find out she had neither been so ungrateful nor so unprincipled as he supposed!"

"Was Mr. Roy satisfied?" asked the young lady, receiving this report with much condescension.

"Mr. Roy *was* satisfied; and, I fancy, is more attached to his wife than ever. He told me so, coming back by the train. He confessed, too, that he had behaved like a brute, and I agreed with him. But he is not in smooth water yet. From what he let out, I believe he is under a solemn promise to another lady, and is fighting with a rope round his neck. It's a very awkward business, but it serves him right! A man should stick to his colours *like* a man, and go down with them flying, when he can't float any longer!"

"*You* would!"

"If somebody only made signals, wouldn't I! I would run up my ensign sooner than she thinks. I"—

"But you haven't finished about Mr. Roy."

"There's not much more to tell. He knows he is in a mess, and he asked me how he was to get out of it."

"What did you advise?"

"He had better slip his cables, I told him. 'You're in bad anchorage,' I said, 'and under the enemy's guns. The only chance for *you*, is to cut and run.'"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WILLOW! WILLOW!

A WOMAN cannot be a dove, and all dove. There is necessarily something of a serpent's wisdom in the very sweetest of the sex, and just enough ferocity to turn and sting his heel who grinds her to the dust. Only the accident of a wind off shore, I imagine, preserved Eneas from a most unpleasant quarter of an hour with his deserted Dido; and I have no doubt the flame of anger burned itself out, unslaked, in that ill-used lady's heart before she gave way to utter depression and despair. Wrath is an excellent styptic; it saves many a victim from bleeding to death, at the first intention. Hereafter, when immediate danger is past, her wounds must have their course—the dull, dead pain, the intermittent throb, the accustomed ache, the smart that tingles while it heals. Then the salve, the cure, renewed health, strength, vitality, and a strong inclination to go down into the battle once more.

Lady Jane slept but little on the night after her Richmond dinner-party; and such broken slumbers as she did achieve were unblest by oblivion or repose. About her was the foreboding that never deceives—the shadow of coming evil, that is as surely followed by its substance as evening by night. I have known trouble—who has not?—

have seen the faithless waters smiling smooth and void, fathom-high above my precious cargo that was floating even now so fair and so secure ; but with all its bitterness, all its despair, the apathy of bereavement was not half so painful as that sickening moment when, owner and master still, I became conscious that the ship was going down under my very feet. If life, as certain dreamers tell us, must be measured by sensations rather than results, can we wonder that the hearts of so many are withered before their heads turn grey ?

At five o'clock a.m. Lady Jane, tossing and tumbling, with a red cheek laid on a round white arm, and a breadth of soft brown hair scattered over a laced pillow, gave herself up to despair ; at seven there came a reaction ; at eight a relapse, and by ten minutes past she was out of bed, writing a note to be taken round at once to Mr. Roy's lodgings, by a footman who was still fast asleep. As it never reached him for whom it was intended, no confidence, perhaps, is outraged by quoting this document in full, observing *en passant* that notwithstanding the lady's agitation it was written in a beautifully clear sloping hand, nor betrayed the least sign of emotion, save in the scoring of certain adjectives and other forcible expressions underneath.

" I have never closed an eye. What is the meaning of it all? What has happened ? Why is one to be *outraged*, *humiliated*, made wretched and *ridiculous* for nothing ? What an afternoon ! What a dinner-party ! and oh ! what a night ! I had rather *die* than endure such *tortures* again. Even Lady Pandora noticed it, and wanted to know if I suffered from the heat, I looked so ill ! I *did* suffer, but not from *heat*. Anything but that. Ask yourself if you were not more than *cold*, distant, cruel, pointedly rude and unkind. Before all those people too ! Even that odious, overdressed, *tight-laced* girl observed it. I caught her *simpering* and *ogling*. No doubt she understood *everything*, and wanted you for *herself*. If you go on like this, she is *welcome* to you, for all I care. No. I don't

mean it. But I am writing with an aching head, and oh ! such a sore, *sore* heart. I wonder whether you *care*. I could understand it if I had done anything to vex you, but I hadn't. I *never do*. Why are you not *equally considerate*? After all, I made the party to please you. I asked every one of the people, even that horrid *detestable* girl, that I thought you would like to meet, and what was my reward ? You never said a kind word from first to last, you wouldn't walk with me, you wouldn't talk to me, you wouldn't even look at me, and you wished me good-night as if I had been a *perfect stranger* ! Do you think I will bear it ? No. Even a worm turns when trodden on, but I am *not* a worm, and it breaks my heart to be trodden on by *you*. Nobody else ever dared to try. Oh ! I *wonder* if that is why— Never mind. Come round the *very* instant you get this. Don't fuss about hours, or appearances, or what the *servants* will think. I don't mind, and I am sure *you* need not. If you are very good, and I see you in *an hour*, perhaps I won't quarrel with you after all, but remain as ever,—*too* truly yours, JANE DE BANIER."

They write themselves into good-humour, over and over again. There is no such safety-valve for a woman as her blotting-book, and the compositions that do them most good are those which expect but do not require answers. While her footman dressed himself, went to Mr. Roy's lodgings, not a quarter of a mile, and returned therefrom, which took him the best part of an hour, Lady Jane cooled down to a reasonable state of mind, and began to contemplate the future from a more hopeful point of view. It was not her nature to despond, and since her girlhood she was accustomed to place great reliance on the only person she could thoroughly trust to further her own interests, to wit, Lady Jane. The footman, feeling in so far a free agent that he was not yet powdered for the day, returned leisurely enough, and her ladyship's maid, likewise with great deliberation, took up her ladyship's note to her ladyship's room.

"What is this?" exclaimed the mistress, turning pale.

"If you please, my lady," answered the maid, "Mr. Roy was gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes, my lady. The people of the house said he left no address, so Charles thought he had better bring the note back."

"Charles was right. That will do, Flounce. I'll ring when I want you."

She tried to steady her voice, and thought she had succeeded, but Flounce, a romantic person not much fettered by an uncertain engagement to a distant butler, glanced in her face, and knew as well as we do that her lady had received a grievous hurt in those regions her maid considered most susceptible to what she was pleased to call "a disappointment of the affections."

"I never thought much of Mr. Roy," she confided to the housekeeper, over their strong black tea. "He's not at all the sort of gentleman as I should have chose, not for *my* lady. No hardour, no devotion. Why, I've known him keep of her waiting to walk out with him a quarter of an hour and more. That's not a true-'arted attachment, Mrs. Rolle—never think it! I've had men, and so have *you*, I daresay, that distracted if you went and said a wry word; they'd be off to strap their razors, or pay their penny at Waterloo Bridge, a'most before you'd time to turn round and make it up!"

"It's best to kiss and be friends, when you come to that," returned Mrs. Rolle, an elderly woman of ample proportions. "If my lady seems downhearted-like, Miss Flounce, hadn't you better take her up another cup of tea?"

"Downhearted" is no word to express her ladyship's discomfiture. Before luncheon she had gone through more vexation than falls to the lot of many people in a twelvemonth. With a certain wilfulness that formed part of her character, she

put on her bonnet, the prettiest she had, and went unattended to make inquiries at Mr. Roy's domicile for herself. These were most unsatisfactory. He was gone, of that there seemed no question. But where? Could she have found out, she might have been tempted to follow; but even then, to what good result? He had deceived and compromised her, nobody ever behaved worse; he was a villain and a traitor, yet she could get no redress! The world, *her* world, would protest it served her right. She should have waited for his divorce, and kept him off till he was really free. The woman ought never to be in the greatest hurry of the two. With her experience she might have known better, and in her childish delight at finding something to care for, should have curbed her feelings before they were allowed to carry her too far.

"I should like to lie down and die," thought Lady Jane, "or at least to go to bed and not get up till the day after to-morrow; but I am engaged to dinner this very evening, and what will people think, what will people say, when they learn that he is gone out of town, if I don't show myself everywhere? No; for the children's sake I must make an effort. That is only half a defeat which is concealed from the world, and rather than see myself pitied by Lady Pandora, I would be broken on the wheel with a smiling face!"

So her ladyship went to dinner-parties as usual, in a selection of square-cut dresses that did justice to all her attractions, parrying inquiries as to Mr. Roy's absence with an affected knowledge of his movements and a cool audacity that did not the least impose on her friends. She looked handsomer than ever, people said—an improvement Lady Pandora kindly attributed to paint, but which

we are inclined to believe resulted from a subdued restlessness, that brought a deeper flush to her cheek and a brighter sparkle to her eye. She laughed louder, too, it was observed, and she spoke in a higher voice than she used, while, to quote Lady Pandora once more, "she flirted worse than ever, getting men about her of all sorts and ages. Dreadful, my dear, really ! So noisy, so *manièrée*, and such bad style !"

But a square dinner-dress, however low it may be cut, and however liberal a view it may offer of that snowy surface, affords no clue whatever to the secrets burning within a lady's breast.

There is a story, verified, I have been told, by medical records, of a man who wore a glass pane substituted for the skin and outer coatings of his stomach, through which the inquisitive might observe—not, I should think, without apprehension for their own interiors—the curious process of digestion. Such a window I can believe most startling in the stomach—but imagine one in the breast! What wonders would the bystanders behold ! what contradictions, giving the lie direct to the smooth brow and the smiling cheek ! what envy, hatred, malice, and contempt, where the well-drilled face expressed sympathy, good-humour, cordiality, and subservience ! No ! Under such conditions society would fall to pieces in a day. We had better remain as we are, digest our food as best we can, without revealing how sadly it disagrees with us, and hate an enemy—or, for that matter, a friend — without flourishing our feelings for the edification and amusement of the town.

Nobody kept her own counsel more resolutely than Lady Jane. Soldiers have been decorated

with medals and clasps for less courage than she displayed, night after night, under a galling fire from the adversary, and a random shot every now and then from some treacherous ally. There are martyrs in the worst of causes; and for those who admire endurance and self-command, her ladyship was a goodly sight as she moved in or out of a drawing-room, cool, stately, unabashed—like a frigate sailing majestically through the fire of a battery that has not quite succeeded in getting her range.

The men flocked round her by scores, more importunate, more attentive than ever. Only a woman—and a woman who had been slighted—could have detected in their manner a shade more of interest, a shade less of respect, than she had heretofore considered her due. After a while she got used to it, perhaps even liked it; but at first it was galling in the extreme. She carried her head high, though, even under this new degradation, and allowed nobody to see by her manner that she was not marching proudly to victory, rather than retiring steadily under defeat.

Yes, she could not disguise it from herself: like every woman smarting for an imprudence shared between them, she had to bear all the man's punishment in addition to her own.

CHAPTER XXXIX

YARD-ARM TO YARD-ARM

MOVED by the advice of his nautical friend, nautically expressed, Mr. Roy's first impulse was to "cut and run" beyond the bounds of Britain, putting some ten leagues of salt water between himself and one of the ladies he had so cruelly wronged. But such expatriation would in no way have furthered his reconciliation with the other; and the dearest wish of his heart, as the spirits at Mrs. Eccleston's seemed to have guessed, was again to pay his addresses, in hope of a favourable hearing, to his own wife. Under these circumstances he bethought himself that no hiding-place could be so secure as the heart of London, and removed accordingly, with his valet and effects, to a monster hotel, whence he took a fresh departure for lodgings on a second-floor, situated considerably to the east of Temple Bar. Here he was no sooner established than he proceeded to write an exceedingly penitent letter, imploring Nelly's forgiveness for past injustice, and promising, as Othello always does when he is ashamed of himself, never to suspect her again. This done, he felt assured that by return of post he would receive a full and free pardon, with a cordial invitation to the Corner Hotel, Strand.

But his letter, perhaps because it came straight

from the heart, was so stiffly and even clumsily worded that Nelly's pride took fire at some of the very phrases intended to convey extreme contrition and remorse, prompting her to write back such an answer as filled him with dismay. He had never calculated on her taking the higher ground, and demurring to a reconciliation with *him*. It was like the "I banish you!" of Coriolanus; and he felt it even more richly deserved.

She wrote temperately, nay, kindly; abjured all feelings of malice and irritation, laying great stress on her disinclination to enter into the subject of her own sufferings, or her own wrongs. But how was she ever to trust him again? How could she run the chance of seeing her life's happiness once more shattered at a blow, without a hope of defending herself?—nay, her reputation blasted by the very man who ought to protect it from the slightest breath of shame? There were certain illusions that, once dispelled, could never be restored. A woman's love must not be put off like an old dress, or changed for a newer at the fancy of the wearer. No *man*, probably, could be made to understand how precious it was, how unchanging, and how eternal. She felt no shame in confessing that she would always care for him to whom she had plighted her faith at the altar, BUT (underlined with vigorous emphasis) nothing could undo the past, and it would be better for them never to meet again. Though she had been insufficient for his happiness, she would pray for it night and day. Though she would never more look in his dear face, she would *ask his permission* (underlined again) to sign herself, now and always, his true and loving wife, Elinor Roy.

That our friend was no great judge of the other

sex I need hardly observe at this stage of my narrative. Few men could be less capable of reading between the lines, in such a letter as has been quoted above; and when he sent for his adviser Brail post-haste to come and counsel him under this crushing defeat, the sailor fairly laughed in his face.

"I can't make out their signals," said he, "in a general way, for I've not served my time with the women yet, and I hope I never may; but if this doesn't mean, 'Clear for action!' I'm a Dutchman. Why, man, you should never have written at all. What's the use of a letter when you can go and speak for yourself? No, no. I'm a green hand enough, but I think I've learned this much, that, wife or no wife, manœuvring is only so much time wasted. Yard-arm to yard-arm—that's the way to do it, and let the best man win!"

"Then I'll call this very afternoon; but how if the waiter won't let me in?"

"Knock him into next week. It shows energy, and she'll see you're in earnest!"

"I suppose I had better," answered Roy; reflecting, however, that it would be rather hard on the waiter.

"And now," continued he, with the stiff, reserved manner it was his nature to assume when deeply moved, "I have never had an opportunity of thanking you for all your kindness. Is there anything I can do in return?"

"Yes, there is!" answered the other. "I'll be frank with you. I'm in shoal water myself. And yet I don't know: she's far too good for me—I suppose I ought to give it up!"

"Don't do that," said Roy kindly. "At least, not if it's Miss Bruce."

"Miss Bruce it is!" replied the sailor, with a blush on his brown face that, had it overtaken him in the wardroom, he would never have heard the last of from his messmates. "If you could put in a good word for me with Sir Hector, do you think I should have a chance?"

John Roy, for all answer, scanned this comely suitor from top to toe with a meaning smile.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the latter.

"I was thinking of your own advice. Nobody can put it in practice better than yourself. I will do all I can for you, of course, but go to the young lady's house, try to see her alone, and then yard-arm to yard-arm! I have no doubt the best man will win."

In pursuance of this sage counsel, Mr. Brail, who had got himself up splendidly for the occasion, proceeded with a beating heart towards the town residence of Sir Hector Bruce, devoutly hoping that Roy had been as good as his word, and that he would have no stronger resistance to encounter than might be offered by the young lady herself.

Even Hester's scruples, however, he grew less and less sanguine of conquering the nearer he approached her domicile, for, with the customary perversity of true love, he overrated the value of his idol in proportion as he depreciated his own.

Can we wonder that he "stood off and on," as he called it, walking up and down, and traversing the street several times, before he found courage to knock at the well-known door? or that, when it was opened, he felt for one cowardly moment it would be a relief to learn Miss Bruce was not at home?

Following the servant upstairs like a man in a dream, he was conscious of a vague, stupid wonder

how he should come down again. Whether as the happiest man that ever stepped, or as a poor, unlucky devil, without a hope or a fear left in the world!

Notwithstanding its romance, the sensation reminded him a little of his first visit to a dentist.

But no sooner was he through the drawing-room door and fairly in her presence, than the sight of the girl he loved dispelled, as it always did, the forebodings and misgivings that had haunted him so cruelly. Even diffidence became absorbed in admiration, and all other feelings were lost in a sense of irrational delight only to be near her once more. When she rose—a radiant vision with blue ribbons in her dress—and gave him her slim white hand, he felt perfectly composed and happy, even while admitting it was impossible such an angel could ever be his own!

He hardly dared look her in the face, she seemed so beautiful. Perhaps that was why he failed to notice the shifting colour, the deepened eyes, the trembling of the delicate mouth and chin, that told their own tale.

Neither of them could subsequently have given an account of their conversation. I imagine they talked about the weather, and the opera, and somebody's ball, unconsciously and without attaching the slightest meaning to any one word they said. Presently, the shuttlecock fell dead between two such preoccupied players, and an awkward silence ensued that neither found courage to break. The ship was becalmed, as it were, and lay such a log on the water she had not even steerage-way!

Brail's pulses were beating hard, his lip twitched, and his strong nerves thrilled like a girl's! If Miss Bruce betrayed less discomposure,

it was because she kept her head bent over some embroidery, stitching with an industry beyond praise; but I believe she unpicked most of the work next day.

In such cases, though undoubtedly he ought, the gentleman does not always speak first.

"Have you—have you chanced to see anything of Mr. Roy lately?" asked Hester, turning to sort the silks in her work-basket, with a transparent affectation of unconcern. The question brought him two feet nearer at once, and it is but justice to state that when fairly yard-arm to yard-arm, he opened fire without delay.

"Seen Mr. Roy?" he repeated—"I have seen nothing else! I never left him, Miss Bruce, till he returned to his duty. I did everything you told me. I ask nothing better than to do everything you tell me for the rest of my life!"

"Are you so obedient? I had no idea you were so much afraid of me."

"You must have seen it. I've been the biggest coward in that way ever since the first time I met you at the Horticultural Gardens. I daresay you have forgotten all about it?"

No answer.

"I haven't. I never shall! You were rigged out in a white dress and had hoisted your favourite colours. You told me they were! Sailor's blue—deep and true!"

"I think I remember. You said you liked blue."

"I said no more than the truth, and not half so much as I thought. Somehow I never *can* say as much as I want to *you*."

"That dress was rather a favourite of mine. Do you know I've got it still? Directly we were

introduced, I felt sure you would admire it, being a sailor."

"How did you know I was a sailor?"

"By the way you carried your hands dangling outwards—so—as if they were ready to do anything. Able and willing, you know. I always liked sailors!"

They were willing enough now, those brown, able hands. They caught one of hers in their manly grasp, with infinite tenderness and delicacy, but yet so firmly as to claim it for their own, and when they had captured their prisoner, lifted it, resisting faintly, to a pair of eager lips.

Need I go on? Surely a lady thus fettered considers herself no longer a free agent, and must make the best terms she can. How Miss Bruce expressed submission — whether she hauled her flag down, or sheered off to leeward, or practised any such manœuvres of the vanquished—I decline to say, but, for the next half-hour or so, there is no doubt she carried a red ensign at the fore! Had the weather necessitated coals, and had the footman brought them in with stealthy footfall, he would have seen his young mistress sitting contentedly on the sofa, with her head against a broad, honest shoulder, and a strong, honest arm encircling her waist. The work-basket, clumsily enough, had contrived to get itself upset, and the embroidery, with a needle sticking upright, lay tumbled on the floor.

What do people talk about when they have just become engaged? Happily nobody knows. They cannot remember themselves, and are seldom overheard, as such conversations are invariably carried on in whispers. I fancy that even in these moments of rapture, as in most

earthly enjoyment, much of the pleasure consists in retrospection. "When did you first begin to think *you* liked *me*?" "When did you first begin to think *I* liked *you*?" "Do you remember when I danced with the captain?" "Have you forgotten how vexed I was about the flower?"—and so on—and so on. There is not much sense in it. The faculty man calls Reason has totally absented itself, the power man calls Folly reigns supreme, and yet, I ask each and all of you who have waged the common venture, who have "*gelebt und geliebt*," whether these are not the moments when weak mortality is most convinced it possesses an immortal soul?

To "see papa in the library" seems rather a come-down after flights like these; yet, for suitors of such girls as Miss Bruce, it is an inevitable sequel. Brail, agitated and anxious, while supremely happy, wondered how Sir Hector could be so composed. The old man's hand was cool, his brow serene, and he bowed his visitor into a chair without the slightest symptom of emotion. But then, though very fond of Hester, he was not in love with her, and it seemed, moreover, that he had not been taken wholly unawares.

Roy having fulfilled his promise, the father had found time to consider the pretensions and general character of the man who was going to ask his daughter of him as a wife. In the library they were closeted for more than an hour, and at the end of that time Brail scarcely knew whether he was accepted or not. The pros and cons seemed so many, and must be so exhaustively treated. The want of fortune, the hazardous profession, were such grave objections. But, on the other hand, Hester's happiness should be the

first consideration, though young people did not always know their own minds, and Mr. Brail's personal character was so wholly unimpeachable, that—in short, there was a great deal to be said on both sides, and nothing must be done in a hurry. Sir Hector was getting infirm and felt fatigued, he would not detain his visitor any longer, but, perhaps, if Mr. Brail had no better engagement, he would dine with them to-day at eight sharp. A little family party of three—nobody but themselves! how could Mr. Brail have a better engagement? He had no fears now. The very footman who let him out seemed to look on him as one of themselves.

CHAPTER XL

WELCOME HOME

"WHAT a rum fellow Fitzowen is! He promised to come to Norway with us, and now that the yacht is ready, sails bent, and stores on board—hang him! he throws me over at the last moment!"

The speaker, a ruddy, square-built personage, wearing his hat very much aslant, who stood in his club-window looking thoroughly aggrieved, threw out the above remark as a bait for general sympathy.

"Fitz was always slippery," observed one of the circle. "But it isn't his fault this time, poor devil! He's gone a-mucker. I always said he would, and now he is forced to bolt!"

"Money?"

"Money—or rather bills. No fellow can stand sixty per cent. It would break the Rothschilds."

"You're all wrong," interrupted a third gossip, who prided himself on the accuracy of his information. "It has nothing to do with money. It's the other thing. Fitz has been refused, and is so astonished, he has fled the country."

"Refused! Then women are not all such fools as I thought. Who is the wise virgin?"

"Miss Bruce. Rather a good-looking virgin, and an heiress. No wonder Fitz feels it. He was getting deuced hard-up."

"I thought no English girl with money ever refused an Irishman without!"

"Fitz isn't an Irishman—only an Irish peer."

"Then that accounts for it. I suppose he'll sell his horses. I shouldn't mind having the bay mare. Where is he off to?"

"Sicily — Kamschatka — Madagascar — the Levant—wherever fellows *do* go when they can't pay up."

He couldn't have started for *all* these places, and was, indeed, no farther off than County Galway, where he owned a property that as yet he had never seen, but now determined to visit with certain vague ideas of becoming a judicious landlord, a respectable country gentleman, and doing some little good in his generation.

Morally, our friend had sustained what we may call "a shake." All his preconceived notions as to the ends and aims of life seemed to have changed. It was beginning to dawn on him that a human being, even a good-looking young nobleman, with an Irish peerage, might have been put into this world for more useful purposes than to eat a certain number of dinners, wear out a certain number of boots, and lay siege to a certain number of hearts, not very well worth winning after all!

Like Byron's sample-peer, he had

> Loved his love and gamed his gaming,

so it occurred to him he would stop at that point without fulfilling the remainder of the programme.

He had been more than startled, he had been put to utter shame and confusion when he found that one of the weak and frivolous sex he had been accustomed to count as alternately tyrants and victims was capable of shaping her conduct, not by expediency and caprice, but on high moral principles of abstract right and wrong. The man had a fund of chivalry and generosity in his nature, if one could only get at it, and when Mrs. Roy appealed to his sense of honour and duty, she touched the right chord. For the first time he experienced a purer and nobler sentiment than the longing he had hitherto mistaken for Love, and was proud to feel capable of self-denial and self-sacrifice on behalf of a woman he resolved never to see again. "She is in a false position," he said to himself, "and so am I. While we live in the same town, large as it is, there must always be an off-chance of our meeting, and I cannot answer for myself if I am to see those deep grey eyes again! No. I will not thwart her on the path of right. She is so good; she deserves to be happy, and happy I pray that she may be, even if she must needs go back to the husband who never was half worthy of her, who could suspect her without cause, desert her without scruple, and console himself with such a bundle of affectation as Lady Jane!"

So he sought distraction from Nelly's haunting image in the volubility of his Irish tenants, or the prolixity of his Scotch agent, and while perched on a seven-foot bank, watching his plausible labourers working as if the tools burned their fingers, he little dreamed how happy she really was in her old home.

The yard-arm to yard-arm tactics had succeeded with Mrs. Roy as with Miss Bruce. After a sharp

encounter on the stairs, during which Mrs. Phipps told him some home-truths, and was only disarmed by his humble acknowledgment that he had been wrong from first to last, the penitent husband obtained access to his wife, and was allowed to plead his cause, with a success that can never be doubtful when judge and jury are predisposed in favour of the defendant. His arguments, even if not logical, must have been convincing, for scarce twenty-four hours elapsed before Mr. and Mrs. Roy were established, as for a second honeymoon, in the happy shelter of Royston Grange.

And here I think Nelly showed that tact which constitutes so important an element of government, and in which women are so seldom deficient. "If you please, dear," she murmured, while her husband gave her a kiss of welcome, the instant she re-entered her own drawing-room, "I have a great favour to ask."

"Favour," he repeated. "How can I refuse you anything? I shall never be able to make amends for being such a brute!"

"Hush! you are never to say that again. And you promise?"

"Of course I promise! I'll swear to do it now, before I know what it is!"

"You're a darling! Well then, I'm going to ask you. Never, *never* under any provocation allude to the misery and misunderstandings of the last few months! It kills me to think of them. I was in the wrong, and I cannot bear to be reminded of it!"

"*You!* In the wrong!"

"Yes, I was! I ought not to have been so hard, so hasty. I ought never to have quarrelled without giving you an opportunity of making up."

"Nelly, you are simply an angel! There is no more to be said."

But he turned and walked to the window, whence he looked out on the flower-beds running their colours into each other with strange confusion, as seen through his rising tears.

Mrs. Roy occupied herself with her furniture, passing from this article to that with almost childish delight, while she inspected one thing to be sure that it had been dusted, and another that it had not been broken. As his young trees to a landed proprietor, so are the ornaments of her drawing-room to a lady who loves home. She can detect at a glance the least speck of dust, the most trifling change of position, the slightest tampering with these her domestic treasures, and is no less intolerant of a careless housemaid than her husband would be of an inexperienced forester too ready with the axe.

"They've taken pretty good care of my things," said Nelly in the calm, pleasant tones he remembered so well. "That is Susan's doing, I'm sure. You were quite right to keep her on, for the girl understands her business. Now I must go and look round upstairs. I shall not feel thoroughly at home till I've put my bonnet straight before my own glass!"

But here a surprise awaited her, and of a very pleasant nature. John Roy, following to the door of her bedroom, felt his heart thrill to hear the exclamation she was unable to suppress. Everything, even to the pins in the pincushion, was exactly as she had left it on that ill-omened day in March, when she took her last look of the dear chamber she never hoped to see again. It seemed like a dream; she could not believe she had been

absent more than an hour, and she turned her sweet face on her husband with a ludicrous expression of astonishment and delight.

Then she flung herself into his arms, half laughing, half crying, and sobbed out—

"This can't be Susan's doing too. My darling, my darling, you have been kinder to me than I deserve."

"That would be impossible, Nelly," he answered gravely, "but I am glad you are pleased with this little fancy of mine. Before I left home I gave strict orders that nothing should be changed here on any pretence. I wanted it to look like home for you if you came back."

"And suppose I had never come back?"

"I left orders in that case too. The room was to be locked up, and nobody should have used it again till another proprietor came to live at Royston Grange."

Nelly was perfectly happy now, for she knew that wayward, unjust as he had been, he must have loved her in spite of all.

She pressed her forehead hard against his breast, and then looked fondly up in his face.

"But you didn't marry a lady, you know," she murmured. "Will you never be sorry for that again?"

"A lady!" he repeated, and she could not doubt the answer came straight from his heart. "Why, Nelly, you are the best and highest of ladies—a true, loving woman, far above rubies, and more precious than the finest gold!"

THE END

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